



WORK, BODY, AND SELF: A YEAR OF
TRANSFORMATIONS
INSA NOLTE

Insa Nolte was born in Göttingen and completed her first degree at the Freie Universität Berlin before moving to the UK. After completing her PhD at the University of Birmingham in 2000, Insa held the Kirk-Greene Junior Research Fellowship at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, before returning to Birmingham. Over the course of her career, Insa has worked closely with Nigerian colleagues and institutions, and she is Professor of African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham and Research Professor in History at Osun State University, Nigeria. Insa's research focuses on social and political processes from the ground up. Her first book focuses on the local politics of the Nigerian politician and Yorùbá leader Obafemi Awolowo, and subsequent publications and books have explored ethno-national politics, youth, and gender. Insa's current research explores the social history of Muslim-Christian relations and the largely peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in the Yorùbá region of Nigeria. – Address: African Studies and Anthropology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom. E-mail: m.i.nolte@bham.ac.uk.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was defined by the friendship, support, and engagement of the Wiko staff and the 2022/2023 Fellows. This was partly due to the format of the programme: it is a great privilege to be part of a community of brilliant researchers and outstanding professionals dedicated to supporting scholarship in one of Europe's most exciting cities and countries for a year. But every year is different, and for me the real impact of my year arose from the warmth, kindness, and intellectual generosity of our group. I enjoyed the camaraderie and friendship of activities surrounding shared seminars,

lunches, dinners, and other celebrations and activities such as karaoke, dancing, and exercise, or visits to restaurants, museums, theatres, and the city's opera houses. By chance or providence, I ended up spending more time with some Fellows than with others, and I am very grateful for their friendship: it made all the difference. But I think that I would have enjoyed more time with almost everyone in the group, and when it was time to say goodbye, I was gripped by regret for the exchanges we might yet have had. It was a privilege to leave Wiko while we were enjoying ourselves most: *zu gehen, wenn es am schönsten ist*.

Looking back at my time in Berlin, I realise how much I benefitted intellectually from being part of the amazing group of 2022/2023 Fellows. While the distinctions between different disciplinary fields, and especially between the natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities, were sometimes bewildering, they really drove home to me how important it is to take nothing for granted in one's own work. With hindsight, I could not say whether I benefitted more from exchanges with colleagues in anthropology or cognate disciplines such as history and textual studies, or from exchanges with colleagues whose work had very little overlap with my own. Very often, I was inspired by the genuine curiosity of those who knew very little about my area of research.

For me, the fellowship year was also deeply transformative in other areas. I remain deeply grateful to a group of amazing women – all 2022/2023 Fellows – for accompanying me on the journey from cheerful waddling to being able to run for about 5 km by the end of the year. It has been an adventure! And finally, the fact that, due to unforeseen circumstances, I spent significant time in Berlin without my partner and two of my three teenage children offered me a glimpse of life beyond the immediate relationships and responsibilities of family life. This was not always easy, but it has given me great confidence, and even zest, for the years to come.

The reward for writing a book? Planning more books

My Wiko project focused on a large archive of materials relating to the social history of Muslim-Christian relations in southwest Nigeria from the nineteenth century to the present. Over several years of anthropological and historical research, I had collected a lot of material, originally out of curiosity. However, eventually it dawned on me that many of the traditional and Muslim sources shared explicit references to the importance of gender relations and marriage for the religious history of the region. Re-reading missionary and colonial sources with this insight in mind offered a very different perspective on the local history of Christianity and on the trajectory of broadly peaceful Muslim-Christian

relations in the region. Thus, the plan for the year in Berlin was to use my material as a starting point for a book that complemented and challenged existing ideas about religious coexistence, both in this part of West Africa and beyond, by exploring Muslim-Christian relations through the lens of gender and marriage.

Implicit in my plan for Wiko was the idea that after the book, I would move on to work on a different topic. However, as soon as I began to write, I realised that the manuscript expanded in unexpected directions. At first I experimented with a number of workarounds to keep the manuscript within acceptable length for the publishers I had in mind, for example by taking out some material for separate publication in article form. However, it was the Wiko environment, and in particular my seminar and the conversations with other Fellows, which helped me to realise that the data I had was not simply indicative of a unique and important case study, but deeply embedded in, and responsive to, broader historical changes. Yorùbá social history was closely linked to the expansion of European influence as well as the Islamic debates and revolutions that transformed West Africa in the period under investigation. While I needed to convey the distinctive nature of West Africa's social and intellectual history, I also wanted to highlight that the Yorùbá conceptual world was and is not simply an "Other" to the ideas foregrounded in Europe and the West, but rather part of global inequalities, appropriations, and exchanges. It was impossible to convey all this while also maintaining a temporal focus on the entire period I had originally wanted to explore: I would need to write two books.

By the end of the 2022/2023 fellowship year, I had produced a full-length manuscript covering the nineteenth and early twentieth century, while Islam and Christianity were still minority religions in the region. Beyond confirming the importance of gender relations for each religion on its own, the dedicated support of library staff both in Berlin and in Birmingham had enabled me to access a large number of texts that revealed highly gendered exchanges and borrowings between Muslims and Christians. Understanding the importance of Islam as an alternative monotheism for the strategies of African Christians in particular allowed me to challenge widely accepted perceptions of Christian-cum-European influences as the main sources of social innovation and gendered change in the region at the time. I am excited and happy about the insights that have derived from my research, and I really look forward to developing that argument further as I see the book through to publication over the coming year.

A second book, exploring the role of family relationships and intermarriages between Yorùbá Muslims and Christians from the high colonial period to the early twenty-first

century, remains to be written. As it will undoubtedly take several years before I will be able to move on from the topic of Muslim-Christian relations, I realise that I will benefit for many years to come from the time to read and reflect I enjoyed at Wiko.

Running and the art of being a “duck”

Before arriving at Wiko I am afraid I was a bit of a stay-at-home or *Stubenhocker*. What little sports I played in my twenties I had given up as work responsibilities expanded, political dramas unfolded, and I was lucky enough to find myself responsible for a family in which the children (just about) outnumbered adults. Like many people in similar stages of life, I entertained vague notions of taking up some form of exercise again when I had more time. And equally, like many people, I found that “more time” never introduced itself formally. During the Covid lockdowns, I decided that I needed to do something that would take me out of the house beyond gardening and settled on running. As anyone might have told me if I had asked (which I did not), starting exercise in middle age is not like doing it in your twenties. I did enjoy a few glorious runs in my capacity as an independent learner, but sadly these soon led to an injury that took several months to heal. While the exercises that helped me to recover eventually encouraged me to take up yoga, which I thoroughly recommend to anyone who needs more balance in their life, I started to think of running as the exercise I missed out on.

Coming to Wiko, I learnt that it is famous for its running group. Unfortunately for me, this group was, however, so highly accomplished that its members consider the 5–6 km run around the Grunewaldsee a warm-up exercise. I am actually in awe of them: in 2023, several members trained for, and competed in, half marathons, which is clearly an extremely cool thing. However, I saw no way of bridging the gap between my own vague ambitions and their skill level until a Thursday evening dinner sometime in late winter, where a much-beloved and very sporty Fellow suggested to several women and me that we could just form our own group. She also suggested a fairly simple training programme that would reduce the risk of injury. I am pleased to say that we recognised this advice as excellent. As the evening progressed, we agreed that while we could not really run, we could waddle; and a wonderful community was born. As “the ducks,” we met once a week to run, nay, hop, waddle, and glide together, and although our ambitions were occasionally interrupted by travel, visitors, and sadly some injury too, we all progressed from one-minute runs to longer intervals.

Being part of a group, however loosely knit, made a big difference to me. On the odd headache-y morning after a long night I still got up to run on a Friday (later Thursday) morning because I knew someone was waiting for me. I enjoyed every run because there was no judgement if one of us needed to slow down or return to walking, and because we all delighted in one of our members' amazing ability to sprint up the stairs on the north side of the lake without turning red in the face. It was an absolute highlight of my time at Wiko when two of us were able to go for a joint run with the established running group: to me that felt like I had reached an important goal. But really it was our journey to this point that made the difference, because it linked the thrill of running to the shared pleasure in the glorious nature that surrounded us and introduced me to the joy of unforced conversations enabled by shared exercise. There was something very special about the Wiko ducks' early morning chats about our plans for the day as we shooed the real ducks from the walkway circumnavigating the Hubertussee.

Since returning from Berlin I have been running on my own, and my pleasure in the experience and the particular way of being alive facilitated by running remains unabated. But I have missed the company of my fellow ducks, and I very much hope to recreate the experience and to find fellow conspirators who enjoy a bit of a waddle – or hop, or glide – with their morning chats as I settle back into life in the UK.

Life beyond the security of family bonds

There are very few films or novels about female professors whose research focuses on cultures other than their own and who are also part of a family with three small or school-age children. The reason is not that we lead boring lives – quite the contrary! But we just don't have the time to write, or even advise on, the screenplay or text. Even if we are lucky enough to work in a university where women are adequately represented at all career stages, the everyday pleasures of spending appropriate time with a partner and offspring and the desire to maintain friendships, collaborations, and acquaintances across long distances and cultural boundaries take up most of the day. In my case, I found the time I needed for work and family in numerous ways. In addition to doing less exercise than ideal (see above), I often relied on “easy” friendships for my social life. Many of my UK friends are people I met through the children or through work, while others were initially friends of my husband's, who is the more cheerful, fun, and outgoing partner in our relationship.

When I first applied to and was initially accepted by Wiko, we had planned to spend the year in Berlin as a family: our daughter was going to take a gap year before returning to the UK to attend university, our sons would go to school, and my husband would work remotely as much as possible. However, things turned out differently. If our sons left their school, we were told, their places would be given to others and they would not even be guaranteed a place in a school that offered their choices for the GCSE examinations for which they would need to prepare. While both boys had looked forward to a year in Berlin, they did not appreciate the prospect of not being able to return to the school where they had made friends and of having to take examination topics they had not chosen. In the end, we decided that our daughter and I would move to Berlin, while my husband and our sons would remain in the UK. As we were very kindly given a flat that, at a push and with foldout beds, could accommodate five, we could visit each other as often as possible. During their stays in Berlin, my husband and sons very much enjoyed participating in shared meals and especially dinners and the interaction with other Fellows. However, broadly limited to Wiko holidays and school holidays, we also spent long stretches of the year apart from each other.

Living without the support and expectations of all close family members was an interesting and novel experience for me. It was a great pleasure to see my daughter find work and a lovely group of friends in record time and to use our time together to explore the great, if only partially related, German traditions of the *Konditorei* and the *Regietheater*. Living with each other outside of established family structures allowed us to deepen our understanding of each other as individuals and women of linked but different generations. I did, however, miss my husband and sons terribly between visits. I also felt quite guilty for leaving my partner with the main responsibility for two adolescent young men who were, at 15, at a slightly more complicated stage of life than our daughter. My first response to this constellation was to make the most of my time in terms of my research, and to spend any free time either with my daughter or to catch up with other German family members. But after a few months, I realised that by dividing my time between work and family I was simply repeating an older pattern, albeit in a slightly different way than before. It seemed a pity to miss out on the opportunities that the year at Wiko offered me. As the attentive reader may have guessed, this was roughly around the time I took up running!

I also began to think more actively about life beyond the security of family and child-care. With our oldest child preparing to go to university and two children at an age where

they wanted to spend more time with friends than family, my husband and I had often spoken about the fact that we would be “empty nesters” in a few years. I for one had been quite worried about what I might do with myself once that happened. And yet I had not taken advantage of the opportunity to try out at Wiko what that life might be like. To remedy this omission, I decided to speak to everyone at Wiko in as much detail as possible and to follow up on texts, conversations, and encounters I had enjoyed. I cannot say that this was successful in every instance, but despite the occasional misunderstanding or clash of timetables, I am very pleased I tried. Revisiting first impressions confirmed to me that all of my Co-Fellows were and are genuinely interesting people. And in a few cases, it showed me that making new friends and acquaintances outside of the realm of immediately shared interests was not only possible, but fun. I really hope to catch up with many of the 2022/2023 Fellows in the coming years.

I would of course be lying if I pretended to have become a totally different person. At this point in time I am very glad that I will be able to spend the rest of the summer with all family members and to say good-bye properly when our daughter leaves for university. I am also glad to live with my husband again: I recognise that I may be a little biased, but he is a rather wonderful person. But I am happy to have learnt that I, or we, will enjoy navigating the impending adulthood of our children in more ways than I had imagined, and I look forward to opening my life to new people and experiences.

Overall then, the time at Wiko has left me with a clearer sense of my intellectual ambition and a new form of exercise to pursue, but it has also allowed me to overcome some of my fears about the changes to come in my life. I am very excited about the new friendships and opportunities that will emerge from that realisation.