

Men doing field research on women are limited to certain subjects

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From the Petri dish in the controlled environment of a sterile laboratory to the faraway fields of another country, virtually anything can be the topic of scientific study. However, a University of Missouri religion professor found that if the researcher is a male fieldworker studying women, the situation can be challenging.

"The question of whether men can conduct field research on women ultimately will be determined by the quality and type of the data that they gather," said Robert M. Baum, professor of religious studies in the MU College of Arts and Science. "The subject matter of the field research will profoundly shape the possibilities of success. For example, access to women's ritual spaces and esoteric knowledge may be too restricted for male researchers. Research on female religious leaders whose teachings are designed for both men and women and who preside over mixed congregations will be far more fruitful for men to conduct."

His conclusions about male researchers studying female subjects are based on his extensive observations of the Diola (pronounced joe-la) people. Baum has been traveling to southwestern Senegal on the African continent and conducting field research among the Diola communities, approximately 600,000 people, for more than 30 years. The modern Diola are primarily rice farmers.

Initially, Baum's work focused on pre-colonial Diola religious history during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, a period when there were male prophets. Later in his research, Baum studied the work and influence of

Diola female prophets who began appearing after the French and Portuguese conquest of Diola lands in the late 1800s.

As he spent time in the Diola culture and grew older, Baum increasingly was given access to male religious elders and their shrines. Despite his improving social status, he found it was more difficult to study the rites and sacred places of women.

"My participation in the initiation of a new rain priest in January 1975, and my decision to perform a sacred dance with other men in the community, marked a decisive turning point in my fieldwork," Baum said. "This did not, however, provide a similar opening at the various women's shrines."

Baum said the most difficult topic to interview the women about was the primary women's fertility shrine, Ehugna, which was only accessible to women who had given birth. The most powerful female religious leader refused to be interviewed about anything related to her shrine.

"She told me that the day I give birth to a child, I should come to her and she would explain everything about Ehugna," Baum said. "That night, I dreamed I was pregnant. I told her about the dream; she laughed and said it was not good enough."

Baum was able to collect information for his study of the Diola through a gradually widening network of women. This information was restricted, however, because they taught him only what was permissible for men to know.

"There are limits to this knowledge," Baum said. "I could not attend the women's fertility shrine, which is the focal point of women's ritual lives. If I had gone to the maternity house, which is where young women receive their final instruction on what it means to be a woman in Diola

society, I would have been ostracized from the men's shrines and societies. Many Diola consider men visiting the maternity house a serious violation that could result in death."

When granted the rare interview with a Diola prophetess, Baum was not permitted to take notes or use a recording device, but he had to rely on memory to recall the often hours-long sessions. The prophetess would speak freely of rain shrines and community oriented teachings, but was not willing to comment on her sacred work associated with Ehugna—no men allowed.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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