

# NEH Application Cover Sheet (FT-264924)

## Summer Stipends

### PROJECT DIRECTOR

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**Status:** Senior scholar  
**Field of expertise:** Cultural Anthropology

### INSTITUTION

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Boston University  
Boston, MA 02215-1403

### APPLICATION INFORMATION

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**Title:** *Singing Wives & Silent Widows: Making and Unmaking Marriage in West Africa*

**Grant period:** From 2019-06-01 to 2019-07-31  
**Project field(s):** Cultural Anthropology; Gender Studies; African Studies

**Description of project:** Something is happening to marriage around the world, and although scholars have long been preoccupied with marital institutions and dynamics we are now scrambling to catch up to a plethora of new trends. My project adds novel insights to this flourishing field by focusing on the perplexing unspeakability of Jola widows in West Africa alongside the din of wives who collectively sing about their marital woes. These phenomena provide fertile ethnographic ground for re-thinking enduring humanistic concerns with the relationship between economy and affect, materiality and emotion, and instrumentality and intimacy

### REFERENCE LETTERS

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Cara Ellis McCarthy  
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## Singing Wives & Silent Widows: Making and Unmaking Marriage in West Africa

*Dúdú, nighanhoulò; Sulen naiabé [anarre angarre]  
Sulen naghar ehloka akan d'elupool  
[You are a fool; Sulen married a woman  
Sulen put a dog in his house]*

Married women in Jola villages along coastal West Africa regularly compose and sing together short songs, called *uñagau*, that become an abbreviated anthem associated with a particular individual. If you find yourself in a Jola village you will likely hear these songs filling the soundscape around you. But it might take you longer to notice the widows. Jola have no word for widow, although there is a word for the houses – *kungumaaku* – in which widows reside after their deceased husband's house has been torn down. Even though *kungumaaku* comprise up to 34% of the households in Jola villages, widows themselves are largely invisible and silent.

It is this contrast between singing wives and silent widows that informs my current book project on marriage and gender relations in rural West Africa. The seemingly stark divergence between wives and widows highlights the disparity between speaking and silence, visibility and invisibility, the named and un-named.<sup>1</sup> But it would be a mistake to interpret this difference between singing and silence as one that reflects the conditions or moods of their subjects; that is, a cheerful singing wife and a subjugated silent widow. A closer look at both the content and context of the songs themselves, as well as the conditions and desires of widows, yields unexpected insights into marriage and gendered political agency.

This book project builds on the ethnographic and historical research that informed my first book, but engages new topical and theoretical arenas. My continued ethnographic engagement with Jola villagers in rural West Africa has increasingly focused on recent shifts in women's lives, such as increases in widowhood and various transformations in marriage and motherhood practices.<sup>2</sup> My questions regarding these dynamics are framed primarily in terms of gender relations, kinship studies, and feminist scholarship, although there are also intriguing ways that these issues intersect with the politics of storytelling (Arendt 1959; Jackson 2013). I have found it productive, for example, to engage married women's songs as tightly packed stories doing political and ethical work in subtle ways. Similarly, my research on widows explores the limitations of narrative – and the possibility for non-discursive agency – when a significant segment of the population refuses to tell its stories.

### *Singing Wives*

*Uñagau*, which are composed and sung only by married women, are typically two lines long and can be as short as seven words. Members of one's in-married work group, who are generally one's closest confidants, regularly sing each other's songs in public spaces. Women sing them when they work together, visit each other, and gather at public events like weddings or funerals. The songs themselves are short, but they pack a powerful punch. They are predominantly about two subjects: gossip and marriage. Some songs encode a rebuke to someone who has offended the composer. Songs about marriage typically

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<sup>1</sup> This last aspect of “named and un-named” is especially poignant in this case, not only because of the lack of a Jola word for widow, but because *uñagau* is the Jola word both for this genre of married women's songs and for “names” more generically.

<sup>2</sup> Jola are an agrarian, rice-cultivating ethnic group residing along the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa. I have been conducting research among Jola villagers since 1999, with extended residence in my primary fieldsite from 2001-2003 (two years), 2010 (six months), and 2016 (5 weeks). For more general information about the Jola, see Baum (2016); Davidson (2016); Linares (1992); and Mark (1985).

refer to a husband's hurtful behavior, and when Jola discuss this kind of song they use the word "sing" as an active, head-on verb: She *sang* her husband, rather than she sang *to* or *about* her husband.

Although I have been listening to and singing *uñagau* since my very first days of fieldwork in 2001, I only started systematically recording and interpreting them in 2016. I have collected a small audio archive of *uñagau*, which comprises a poetic repository of women's perspectives and experiences of marriage over the past thirty years, a time of dramatic upheaval in most domains of Jola society. Once unpacked and interpreted, *uñagau* provide novel insights into the transformative possibilities that a potent cocktail of poetry, melody, and an unorchestrated chorus of women's voices can have on both private and public affairs. It is widely acknowledged across ethnographic contexts that women's songs and poetry can express sentiments otherwise unspeakable in conventional discourse.<sup>3</sup> What might these songs tell us about Jola women's experiences of marriage – and the ways it has changed – in recent history? How might these songs themselves provoke such changes? What might their use of various literary devices – such as sideshadowing (Morson 1996), metaphor, and allusion – reveal about broader themes of gendered relations and authorial control? My book takes up these questions through careful analyses of *uñagau* currently circulating around Jola villages, as well investigations into the changes in content, context, and impact of these songs.

*Uñagau* are appreciated for their aesthetic qualities – their poetic choice of words, their oblique references, and their melodic composition. But they are valued primarily for their social work – addressing damaging social and marital conduct indirectly and humorously, and thereby diffusing the inevitable tensions that arise in the fishbowl dynamics of rural life. *Uñagau* marry the phenomenological with the pragmatic by changing the feelings of the composer as well as the very conditions that provoked such feelings, all without a shred of direct confrontation. They take the transformative aspect of storytelling that has been recently trumpeted by so many – advocates of narrative medicine, truth-and-reconciliation commissions, peace building enterprises, etc. – and bring it from those lofty heights into the nitty-gritty micro-politics of quotidian marital and social relations. By attending to the particular dynamics of these story-songs "at work," I hope to convey not only an appreciation for this unrecognized genre, but to more precisely delineate the processes of this under-recognized form of gendered power.

### *Silent Widows*

I have been intrigued and perplexed by widows since early in my fieldwork in 2001. Jola widows *can* speak, but more often than not they choose *not* to, insisting to me that they "prefer to stay alone with this poverty" rather than talk with others, even other widows, about their struggles to survive. A generation ago these women would have been re-married, most often to one of their husband's agnates, and current Jola commentators agree that there never used to be so many *kungumaaku*.<sup>4</sup> While wives sing their husbands into better marital behavior, widows avoid marriage altogether. My project asks how we can understand widows in a place where they are many but they are neither named nor recognized as a social category. I consider how the dynamics of widowhood in Guinea-Bissau pose particular methodological and theoretical problems for analyses still blinded by the normativity of the institution of marriage (Potash 1986). The absence of a term for widow is telling here. Widows hold the kernel of a new system of production and reproduction, but one that does not fit into current – although rapidly transforming – norms. They cannot be named (or even seen) because they are, in a sense, an offense to the past. Widows suggest a haunting of marriage because they represent the prospect of a new material formation that is working outside of it.

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Marriage is a particularly privileged epistemological site not only for thinking about social change, but through which to explore the knotty entanglements of economy and affect, materiality and emotion,

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Abu-Lughod (1986); Briggs (1992); Irvine (1996); Joseph (1980); McNee (2000); Pilzer (2012); Vail and White (1991), among others.

<sup>4</sup> The widows referred to in this project are mostly of reproductive age and often have small children in their *kungumaaku*.

instrumentality and intimacy. Although humanists and social scientists have longstanding preoccupations with marriage, there has been a recent flourishing – especially in history and anthropology – of research on marriage in Africa. It is curious, however, to find a disciplinary divide between historians who emphasize the instrumental facets of marriage<sup>5</sup> and anthropologists who focus more on the affective domain.<sup>6</sup> It is African novelists who have most successfully bridged this divide and provided rich, complex, and humane accounts of the simultaneous strategic and affective aspects of marriage.<sup>7</sup> My project draws on these and other African novels as sources of insight into marriage and the family in contemporary Africa. In so doing it brings these otherwise parallel scholarly conversations together, but not just to demonstrate that marriage has, of course, both economic and emotional dimensions. My analyses of Jola marriage (and its avoidance) interrogate *how* these aspects get caught up in each other in particular ways that illuminate a common existential predicament: how one navigates between choosing one's own path and having that path determined by others.

Singing wives and silent widows are, then, two sides of the same coin. It is through their efforts to strategically and creatively manage their position vis-à-vis men that we gain insights into the particularities and subtleties of women's discursive and non-discursive agency. Through the looking-glass that ethnography sometimes affords, this project promises a re-thinking not only of core social institutions like marriage, kinship, and gender, but also the implicit values and ideologies that undergird them, such as equality, autonomy, and power. My book will explore these dynamics with close attention to the political and gendered dimensions of storytelling.

### Work Plan

The portion of this project for which I am requesting NEH support focuses on collecting and collaboratively interpreting a larger corpus of *uñagau*. I already have enough material on widows for three chapters of my book. However, I would like to expand my collection of *uñagau* and get higher-quality recordings of them for dissemination purposes (see below). I plan to conduct two months of fieldwork in rural Guinea-Bissau (June & July 2019). I have long-term experience in the region, an extensive network of contacts, and fluency in Jola, Kriyol, and Portuguese (the three main languages in this area), all of which will facilitate my research efforts. I plan to record *uñagau* both in spontaneous contexts when they are sung in public and in scheduled recording sessions. I will continue and deepen my discussions with Jola respondents regarding the meanings, impacts, and possible transformations of these songs. My primary interlocutors in Jola villagers – married women themselves – have expressed willingness (and often eagerness) to collaborate with me on this project.

### Products and Dissemination

Through full-time fieldwork in a place with which I am already very familiar, my goal is to complete this phase of research with enough material for the three chapters of my book that focus on married women's songs. My book is still at an early stage, although with the completion of this research I will be in a better position to apply for writing fellowships that will enable me to complete a full draft of the manuscript by 2021. In addition, the advisory board of the African Language Materials Archive (ALMA) has invited me to publish high-quality recordings of *uñagau* on their website, which is internationally recognized as one of best open-access digital resources on African languages. I will work with staff at ALMA to ensure confidentiality as needed with regard to the sometimes-sensitive subject matter of these songs. That said, the composers and singers themselves have expressed excitement at the possibility of their songs reaching a wider audience.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Bunting et al. (2016), Burrill (2015), Jean-Baptiste (2014), and Nolte (2017).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cole and Thomas (2009), Cole and Groes (2016), and Kringelbach (2016). There is certainly some overlap between the two, and some scholars are notable exceptions (e.g. Mutongi 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Adebayo (2017), Adichie (2003), Diome (2013), Emecheta (1986), Forna (2010), and many others.

## Bibliography

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- Davidson, Joanna. 2016. *Sacred Rice: An Ethnography of Identity, Environment, and Development in Rural West Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diome, Fatou, 2013. *Celles qui Attendent*. Paris: Editions 84.
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- Jackson, Michael. 2013. *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Denmark: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Jean-Baptiste, Rachel. 2014. *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Joseph, Terri Brint. 1980. "Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Riffian Berber Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5: 18-34.
- Kringelbach, Hélène. 2016. "'Marrying Out' for Love: Women's Narratives of Polygyny and Alternative Marriage Choices in Contemporary Senegal," *African Studies Review* 59(1): 155-174.
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**EDUCATION**

Ph.D.           **Emory University**, Anthropology, 2007  
M.A.           **Emory University**, Anthropology, 2001  
B.A.           **Stanford University**, Anthropology and Feminist Studies with Honors, 1992

**ACADEMIC PROFESSIONAL HISTORY**

**Associate Professor**, Department of Anthropology (affiliated faculty member, African Studies Center, Kilachand Honors College, and Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies Program), Boston University, 2018-present.

**Assistant Professor**, Department of Anthropology (affiliated faculty member, African Studies Center and Kilachand Honors College), Boston University, 2011-2018.

**Postdoctoral Fellow**, States at Regional Risk Program, Carnegie Corporation, Emory University, 2008-2011.

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Book**

*Sacred Rice: An Ethnography of Identity, Environment, and Development in Rural West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

**Edited Volume**

*Narrating Illness: Prospects and Constraints*, eds. Joanna Davidson & Yomna Saber (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2016).

**Selected Peer-Reviewed Articles and Book Chapters**

“‘People insult me – Oh My!’: Reflections on Jola Women’s Story-Songs in Rural West Africa,” in *Global Reflections on Narratives*, eds. T. Edlmann and T. Hayes (Boston: Brill, in press - expected publication December 2018).

“Towards an Ethnography of Narrative Competence,” in *Narrating Illness: Prospects and Constraints*, eds. J. Davidson and Y. Saber (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2016).

“Introduction: Prospects of Storykind,” by **J. Davidson** and Y. Saber, in *Narrating Illness: Prospects and Constraints*, eds. J. Davidson and Y. Saber (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2016).

“Rice and Revolution: Agrarian Life and Global Food Policy on the Upper Guinea Coast,” in *The Upper Guinea Coast in Global Perspective*, eds. J. Knöerr and C. Kohl (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016): 174-196.

“Of Rice and Men: Climate Change, Religion, and Personhood among the Diola of Guinea-Bissau,” *Journal of the Study of Nature, Religion, and Culture* 6.3 (2012): 363-381.

“Basket Cases and Breadbaskets: Sacred Rice and Agricultural Development in Postcolonial Africa,” *Culture, Agriculture, Food & Environment* 34.1 (2012): 15-32.

“Cultivating Knowledge: Development, Dissemblance, and Discursive Contradictions among the Diola of Guinea-Bissau,” *American Ethnologist* 37.2 (2010): 212-226.

“‘We Work Hard’: Customary Imperatives of the Diola Work Regime in the Context of Environmental and Economic Change,” *African Studies Review* 52.2 (2009): 19-141.

**Book Reviews**

Review of *West Africa’s Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition* by Robert M. Baum, *African Studies Review* 59.2 (2016): 254-257.

Review of *Rice Biofortification: Lessons for Global Science and Development* by Sally Brooks, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40.4 (2013): 790-794.

## **PRESENTATIONS AND CONFERENCES**

### **Selected Invited Lectures**

*Widows, Marriage, & Un-marriage in Rural West Africa*, African Studies Workshop, Harvard University, March 2018.

*Widows & Silence*, Anthropology Speaker Series, UC Berkeley, March 2018.

*Singing Wives: Making and Unmaking Marriage in Rural West Africa*, Anthropology Seminar Series, Boston University, February 2018.

*Sacred Rice & The Problem of Widows*, Department of Anthropology, Haverford College, Haverford, PA, November 2016.

*Sacred Rice: Environmental change and structural uncertainty in Rural West Africa*, Environmental Studies Program, Tufts University, Medford, MA, April 2016.

*The Lives of Others: Enacting Connectivity through Jola Stories*, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) Symposium in honor of Olga Linares, Panama City, Panama, February 2016.

### **Selected Recent Conference Papers**

*A House by (Not Just) Any Other Name: Widows Visibility & Invisibility in Rural West Africa*, Annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC, November 2017.

*The Problem of Widows*, Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Chicago, IL, November 2017.

*Refusing Marriage: The Case of Widows in Rural West Africa*, Annual meeting of the American Ethnological Society, Stanford, CA, March 2017.

*“Women Have Their Songs”: Anthropological Reflections on the Politics of Storytelling in Rural West Africa*, Storytelling: Global Reflections Conference, Inter-Disciplinary Network, Oxford, England, July 2016.

*African Families in Transition: The Case of Widows*, Annual Africa/Diaspora Conference, Center for African Peace and Conflict Resolution, California State University, Sacramento, CA, April 2015.

## **SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS**

- Neu Family Award for Excellence in Teaching, College of Arts & Sciences, Boston University, May 2018.
- Boston University Center for the Humanities (BUCH), Junior Faculty Fellow, 2014-2015.
- Woodrow Wilson Foundation, Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, 2006-2007.
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Teacher-Scholar Fellowship, Emory University, 2004-2005.
- Social Science Research Council, GSC Program, Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, 2001-2003.
- National Science Foundation, Cultural Anthropology Dissertation Improvement Grant, 2001-2003.
- Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, 2001-2003.
- Ford Foundation, Vernacular Modernities Initiative, Area Studies Fellowship, 2000-2001.
- National Science Foundation, Graduate Research Fellowship, 1999-2003.
- Woodrow Wilson Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Humanistic Studies Fellowship, 1998-1999.

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH**

2016 (March-April): Guinea-Bissau (topics included: women's songs, widowhood, gender relations, naming practices, funerary rituals)

2010 (Jan-June): Guinea-Bissau & Senegal (topics included: development and humanitarian aid efforts, environmental change, agricultural transformation, schooling)

2001-2003: Guinea-Bissau (topics included: impact of environmental change on rural populations, social and religious transformation, inter-ethnic relations, gendered domains of knowledge and power, inter-ethnic relations, missionization)

2000 (June-Aug): Portugal & Guinea-Bissau (topics included: ethnicity, ethnic relations, ethnography of archival sources)

1999 (June-Aug): Guinea-Bissau (topics included: nationalism, post-conflict dynamics, ethnicity)

**LANGUAGES:** Guinean Crioulo, Edjamaat Jola, Portuguese, Spanish, French

October 13, 2018

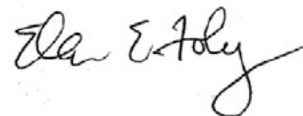
Dear selection committee,

I am writing this letter to recommend Professor Joanna Davidson for an NEH Fellowship. I am delighted to write in support of her manuscript project "*Singing Wives and Silent Widows: Making and Unmaking Marriage in West Africa*." Joanna has already made significant progress in conceptualizing and mapping out her book project, and an NEH fellowship will permit her to finish drafting chapters and to prepare the manuscript for review and publication.

My recommendation is based my appraisal of Joanna's talent as a highly intuitive anthropologist whose work on Jola wives and widows is situated at the intersection of African history and ethnography, feminist approaches to gender relations and kinship, and the poetics and politics of storytelling. In the course of her long-term fieldwork in a Jola community in Guinea Bissau, she has encountered the paradox of singing wives and silent widows. In the course of unraveling this puzzle, Joanna has grappled with some of the most fundamental questions for the humanities and the interpretive social sciences: How do individuals make use of and avoid social recognition? In what ways are our lives and our very persons brought into being through legible customs and traditions like marriage? What sorts of self-making projects are possible outside (and perhaps in spite of) these customary regimes? Joanna's manuscript promises new insight into the communal, aesthetic, social, and political work that stories and songs accomplish as Jola women navigate gender hierarchies and gender relations. Her ethnographic expertise will undoubtedly produce novel and field-changing insights into our understandings of marriage, kinship, gender, and agency. I am tremendously enthusiastic about Joanna's project. Her questions are timely and compelling, her approach is both creative and bold, and I have no reservations about her ability to complete her book manuscript.

In addition to the originality and broad appeal of Joanna's research, I cannot imagine a better person to receive an NEH fellowship. Joanna has all of the attributes of a first-rate scholar. She is brilliant, hardworking, and has an excellent disciplinary foundation in historical and contemporary anthropological theory and method. Nevertheless, these attributes cannot convey that Joanna is a wonderfully generous colleague who delights in exchange with others. She has a genuine intellectual curiosity that ranges far outside the field of anthropology. She gives serious attention (and insightful critique) to the work of her peers and students no matter the stage of elaboration. In sum, she would be a tremendous asset and an invaluable member of NEH's intellectual community. I give her my most enthusiastic recommendation.

Sincerely,



Ellen E. Foley, Ph.D.  
Associate Director and Associate Professor  
International Development, Community, and Environment



Fellowships Selection Committee  
Summer Fellowships  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
Washington, DC

October 17, 2018, 2018

Dear Colleagues and others whom it may concern:

Recommendation for Prof. Joanna Davidson – Confidential

I have been asked to provide a letter of evaluation for Prof. Joanna Davidson, a candidate for a research fellowship. I am happy to write on behalf of this most promising applicant.

A word first on my relationship to her, as is customary. I have known Joanna since she first applied for her present post. I was party to the department deliberations that led to her hiring. We have worked in tandem or in parallel in Anthropology and African studies since she began here at Boston University, and lately also in the new Kilachand Honors College. As someone who has done some of his work on people and places in West Africa where she has done hers, at different times (she has worked on Guinea-Bissau and Senegal; I have worked on Senegal and The Gambia, located inside it), and as her appointed mentor within our department, I have visited some of her classes, co-ordinated syllabi with her, done committee work with her, observed her performance in many others' seminar discussion sessions, conversed often with her in common rooms, and kept fairly close track of her progress in teaching, advising, research, and writing.

She seems to be doing very well indeed on all these fronts, and I think I can speak for my colleagues too in saying that she shows all signs of having launched quite a *highly* successful teaching career here at Boston University over these past several years since her hiring. Having had excellent earlier training at Stanford and at Emory (where she did her Ph.D.), and being a voracious reader, Prof. Davidson is well enough versed in classic social and anthropological theory to be able to place her ethnographic findings in the context of several traditions. From this training and some editing work she's done for the American Ethnological Society, she is well enough versed in different genres of writing to be combining their better influences in finding her own authorial voice in her publications. She has already published *Sacred Rice: An Ethnography of Identity, Environment, and Development in Rural West Africa* (Oxford U.P.) and a number of articles in respected journals, as a look at her c.v. will show. She has been co-editing a collected volume having to do with song. To judge by some of her recent seminar presentations and article writing, she has made substantial headway in researching her second singly-authored

ethnographic monograph, this time on some combination of song, storytelling, marriage, and widowhood -- again with a West African focus.

*Sacred Rice*, the first, is an interesting and informative book indeed, about a people among whom she has lived in West Africa. Known as Jola (or Diola, in the French spelling), they are perhaps best known for their having eluded and survived the efforts of centuries of conquerors to subjugate, exploit, or religiously convert them -- and being so reclusive in their way of life, having only partially accepted the efforts of outsiders to study them. Jola have developed a way of life dependent on cultivating rice as a staple crop and a sacred one, in an area with many winding rivers and mangrove wetlands (and with a unique indigenous tool, the fulcrum shovel, and its own special technique of digging and earth transfer). Now they are finding that climate change is forcing them to reduce their dependence on rice, and thus to change in many other ways as well. Attitudes toward work, cooperation, sharing, and worship at spirit shrines, for instance, are all in the balance, as are habits of child socialization, education, and migration. How these people have been coping with and adjusting to these multiple challenges is a big part of what *Sacred Rice* is about. In a way, as climate keeps changing, the Jola case represents a microcosm of large parts of Africa.

Joanna Davidson's work in *Sacred Rice* ably combines a mix of theory and ethnography, the latter focusing intensely on detailed personal and family history -- specifically, the lives of three related people, a father, mother, and child, with their intertwined but contrasting story lines. The theory will hold its own in sophisticated circles of anthropologists and Africanists. The family focus will make it engaging enough to win a wide readership. The book as a whole will be useful for many academic purposes, in more than one discipline and between (for example, along the different edges where anthropology merges into history, environmental studies, comparative religion, and development psychology). Altogether the book makes an outstanding contribution to our knowledge and understanding of this often mystery-shrouded people, who have been encountering some of the most vital social and environmental questions of our time.

Her next project, already really begun, is an intriguing one indeed. It concentrates on the short story-poems (uñagau) that Jola women sing to each other, more often than not it seems about their husbands, about village gossips, and about what they deem their misbehavior. Rather than being mere complaints for venting feelings, though, these story-songs are also correctives, since they become locally well known and indirectly reach the supposed offenders, reminding them of norms and often, too, of the expectation that they mend their ways. Which, it seems, they sometimes then do.

Linguistically as well as culturally, Prof. Davidson is well prepared for her proposed project, being fluent in both Jola and Crioulo. She neglects to add in her draft proposal that she is also fluent in Portuguese, the official language of Guinea-Bissau and several other African countries, all of them still relatively understudied by anthropologists and others.

Joanna Davidson's work typically conveys a moral mission as well as an informative purpose: a mission of complicating simplistic notions about stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnic antagonism; of appreciating and not just criticizing formal as well as informal institutions and processes of interaction; and of showing the interweaving of cognition and emotion in the flow of family and community life.

Something else Prof. Davidson offers that's rare among scholars, as well, is her experience at the Ashoka Foundation, an organization where unusually innovative and energetic

people from different walks of life come together for coveted grants to launch new socially responsible ventures.

Unsurprisingly, Prof. Davidson has been awarded tenure in the Anthropology Department at BU, in 2018, and she has won in the same year a teaching award too from this same University.

Finally, a note on her personality. Joanna Davidson's commitment both to good causes and to good human relations seems unwavering. Hers is a naturally sunny, sociable, comfortable, and considerate personality in her dealings with others (I think all my colleagues would agree on this) – in groups of all sizes – and yet she has quite a serious side too in her own scholarship and thinking, and a forthrightness that she can draw upon when needed. She is proving a splendid, indeed luminous mentor to graduate and undergrad students while continuing to be an exemplary colleague to contemporaries and seniors. She might also eventually make a department chair or leader of a research institute in our university, or an excellent editor of a journal or book series, or both – things easy to imagine.

In sum, I am happy to recommend Prof. Joanna Davidson most highly for a fellowship on which to work on her next important book. I hope you will share my interest in seeing what this highly intelligent, dedicated, and personable scholar accomplishes in the next steps of her career.

With good wishes,

Yours sincerely,



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