



Rebecca Gearhart with Salima Jazaka, a former leader of a women's dance association in Lamu, Kenya.

Becoming An Insider and An Outsider: The Research of An Anthropologist

By Erinn C. Howard

When I think about science, I think about test tubes, protective eyewear, experimental controls and replication, analytical instruments, and statistical analyses. I think about being an outside, objective observer to reactions occurring in a Petri dish on a sterile lab bench. The research of Rebecca Gearhart, however, does not involve protective eyewear, replication, or expensive analytical machinery. In fact, it is not even a science where a hypothesis is tested objectively; Gearhart interacts with her research subjects and tries to get involved in their cultures and lives. "Hard" science researchers pick your jaws up off the floor; "soft" science researchers, kick back and enjoy the spotlight. The science of Rebecca Gearhart is anthropology.

Gearhart first became interested in anthropology while an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. With a highly diverse population of students at Mount Holyoke, Gearhart says, "I realized how little about the world I actually knew." Forming a close friendship with a student from Ghana, it was perhaps no surprise that when she studied abroad, she chose to focus on Africa, specifically Tanzania and Kenya. Gearhart learned Swahili (one of many languages spoken in Africa), grew close with her host family while abroad, and honed her future focus in on Kenya (in particular, Lamu Island). "Although, if my best friend had been from India," Gearhart laughs, "I could easily have gone in that direction instead!"

Gearhart received her Bachelors degree in both African Studies and History. She combined these fields to earn her Masters in African History from the University of Florida, and went on to receive her Doctorate in Anthropology at the same school. While

working on her PhD and continuing to focus her studies on Kenya, she received a Fulbright Scholarship, due in part to her interesting research and her research methods, which were "cutting edge at that moment," remembers Gearhart.

What exactly was her cutting edge method? Before answering that, we are first going to take a step back and better understand the science of anthropology. Anthropology is a broad subject, as it "covers anything that people do or have done," Gearhart explains, "everywhere and throughout time." There are four main anthropological fields: linguistic, cultural, physical, and archeological. Gearhart's brand of Anthropology is cultural, although she does often work with anthropologists of the three other flavors. As a cultural anthropologist, she says that "the goal of anthropology isn't to write exposés...the Swahili are really like this! ...but instead, to get insights that people in a society might not even get."

A bench scientist can put a myriad of chemicals in a tube, stand back, and later analyze to see what happened. A bench scientist can do the same study in replicates and have as many "control" tubes as they can dream up. However, for an anthropologist, this just cannot be done. A somewhat controversial opinion, Gearhart feels that cultural anthropological research is "highly unreplicable, even by the same person." For starters, who could run an experiment on an entire culture, in replicate, and have controls? It becomes clear quite quickly that anthropology just cannot work like other sciences. Replication and controls are not possible, and one cannot overlook that a cultural anthropologist is standing and observing. Would people act the

