Laibon
An Anthropologist’s Journey with Samburu Diviners in Kenya

“Elliot dares to use his own research to pose the question: Is there any true objectivity in field research and anthropological inquiry? He dares to depict his own attachments and relationships to this very special community, while also staying true to his research. His insights further the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the culture and of the research process, thus expanding the boundaries of anthropology. Readers from budding anthropologists to aid workers to volunteers will identify with Elliot’s observations, experience, and deep connection to the culture he studied and the people he grew to love.” —Kris Holloway, author of Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali

A vivid, engaging account of Elliot Fratkin's apprenticeship into the mysteries of divination and healing by a prominent Samburu laibon. This book succeeds on many levels - as an unparalleled exploration of the secret meanings and methods of divination by laibons; as a window into the experience of extended field research - the insights and challenges, the emotions and relationships; and as a compelling story about our shared humanity, a reminder that people everywhere experience love, loss and life in ways that will seem achingly familiar.” —Dorothy L. Hodgson, Rutgers University

Elliot Fratkin shares the story of his early anthropological fieldwork in Kenya in the 1970s. Using his fieldnotes and letters home to bring to life the voices of those he met, Fratkin invites the reader to experience his cross-cultural friendships with the enigmatic laibon (a diviner and healer of the Samburu and Maasai peoples) Lonyoki, his family, and the people of the nomadic community of Lukumai. Fratkin participated in the daily lives of the Ariaal livestock herders and accompanied the laibon as he performed divination and healing rituals throughout Marsabit and Samburu Districts. After Fratkin reunited Lonyoki with his son and wife, Lonyoki adopted Fratkin into his family, and Fratkin continues his close friendship with Lonyoki’s son Lembalen today.

Black-and-white photographs, a guide to the characters, words, and places, and a list of suggested readings supplement the engaging narrative. Laibon is more than a memoir; it delves into nitty-gritty details of fieldwork, speaks to larger questions about ethnographic research, and provides unparalleled insight into the world of the laibon.

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