

IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT A. FERNEA

Robert (Bob) Fernea was Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and founding director of the Center of Middle East Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, where he taught for more than thirty years and trained many prominent Middle East scholars.

Born on January 25, 1932, in Vancouver, Washington, Bob was adopted at birth by George and Alta (Carter) Fernea. He received his Bachelor of Arts in sociology in 1954 from Reed College, in Portland, Oregon. He wrote his thesis on whether it was possible to distribute an F-scale test to a population and get a reading of their authoritarianism—an idea based on the work of Erich Fromm. He later wrote that “Reed was an essential part of my intellectual life... It was a revelation as well as an education. It was the education at Reed that gripped me.”

Bob attended the University of Chicago Graduate School, and was awarded a Master of Arts in anthropology in 1955 and a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology in 1959. During that time, he was awarded prestigious fellowships from the University of Chicago, the National Science Foundation, and the Danforth Foundation. While living in Chicago, he became reacquainted with Elizabeth Janet Warnock, a fellow Reed graduate, and he and “B.J.,” as she was known, were married in 1956. Following their wedding, the couple moved to a remote southern Iraqi village, Al Nahra, for two years, where he conducted his doctoral research on the relationship between irrigation and social and cultural change. Bob was one of the first U.S.-based anthropologists to conduct ethnographic field research in the Middle East. His pioneering work on the marsh Arab tribes in southern Iraq, *Shaykh And Effendi: Changing Patterns of Authority among the El Shabana of Southern Iraq*, was published by Harvard University Press in 1970.

From 1959 to 1965, Bob taught anthropology and Middle Eastern studies at the American University in Cairo, where his and B.J.'s three children were born. In 1962, he directed the Nubian Ethnological Survey, a project financed by the Ford Foundation to study the displacement of the Nubian people from their villages as the Aswan Dam was built. This research led to the publication of *Nubians in Egypt: Peaceful People* (1973) and *Nubian Ethnographies* (1990), co-authored with Elizabeth Fernea. In 1965 Bob, with his family, returned to the U.S. and spent a year at Harvard University as a postdoctoral fellow before beginning his teaching career at The University of Texas in 1966. The University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, which he founded and directed from 1966 to 1973, remains one of the foremost Middle Eastern studies centers in the country. While at UT Austin he saw the growth of the anthropology department into one of the major departments for the study of the cultural anthropology of the Middle East, Latin America, South Asia, the U.S., the Mexican-American borderlands, and African diaspora culture.

Admired as one of the foremost experts in the field of cultural anthropology and the study of the Middle East, Bob was a Fulbright-Hays fellow in 1971 and a fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1980 and 1990. He was also a member of the executive committee and President of the Board of Governors of the American Research Center in Egypt (1981-1987). He was a Fellow of the American Anthropological Association, and served as President (1991-1993) and a member of the board of directors (1987-1993) of the Society for Cultural Anthropology. He was a founding member of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), a nationally renowned non-profit association that fostered the study of the Middle East. His leading role in guiding scholars working in the Middle East was recognized in 2003 with the MESA Mentoring Award, recognizing exceptional contributions to the education and training of others in Middle East studies.

Bob and B.J. forged a personal and professional relationship that spanned the fifty-two years of their marriage, ending with B.J.'s passing in 2008. In addition to *Nubian Ethnographies*, they co-authored the award-winning book, *The Arab World: Personal Encounters* (1985), which they updated and re-issued in 1997 as *The Arab World: Forty Years of Change*. They collaborated on *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East: Memoirs from a Century of Change* (2002), and Bob narrated a documentary film produced by B.J., *The Struggle for Peace: Israelis and Palestinians* (1991). Although based in Austin for over forty years, they frequently returned to the Middle East to live and work—in Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and the West Bank. They returned to Al Nahra for a visit in 1995.

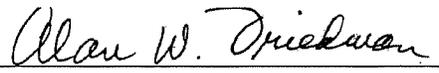
Bob and B.J.'s comfortable home on Bowman Avenue in Tarrytown, Austin, was known as a gathering place for friends, colleagues, and students. There was always someone visiting; scholars, artists, filmmakers, and writers from around the world were hosted at their home and introduced to the Austin community. In addition, the annual ritual of the New Year's Day party brought together good food and good cheer, with friends and family mixing over dishes from a variety of cultures.

Bob had many interests in addition to anthropology. As a young man he danced ballet with the Portland Ballet, and he remained interested in music throughout his life. In the late 1960s and '70s, as a member of the board of the Austin Civic Ballet, he was instrumental in bringing Stanley Hall, of the Sadler Wells Ballet, to Austin to direct the Austin Civic Ballet and, later, the Austin Ballet Theatre. Bob was also an accomplished trombone and piano player, and over the years accompanied many singers, violinists, cellists, and horn players, even becoming a member of a local jazz band during the 1980s. He was an avid runner and swimmer and practiced yoga until the last few years of his life. He spoke French and Arabic fluently.

After retiring from The University of Texas at Austin in 2001, Bob and B.J. stayed in Austin, participating in voluntary teaching, hosting intellectual soirees at their home, traveling to the Middle East for research, and taking an active role in speaking out against the post 9-11 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. They spent many summers on the Oregon Coast and hosted friends and family at their home there. After B.J.'s passing, Bob moved to San Diego, California, to be near his daughters; he and B.J. were greatly missed in Austin. Bob died peacefully at his daughter Laura Ann Fernea's home in San Diego on December 15, 2017. Along with Laura Ann Fernea, he is survived by his son, David Karim Fernea (Austin, Texas), his daughter Laila Catherine Stroben (La Canada, California), their respective spouses, and eight grandchildren.



Gregory L. Fenves, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Kamran Asdar Ali (Chair) and Pauline Turner Strong.