

## Movie Notes–Margaret Mead and Samoa

Mead's Background and Research:

➤ student of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict–

\*after deciding on a course toward becoming an anthropologist at Columbia U, Mead decides that she wants–more than anything–to go to do fieldwork in the South Pacific.



Boas, however, wanted her to choose a Native American tribe with which to work on the question: Are the changes that take place in adolescent girls due to physiological changes or cultural constructions?

They compromised and she left for the South Pacific in August of 1925 to work on Boas' question.

- Mead arrives and studies the language for a short time–
- She then moves to a smaller island where she lived with an American family–
- She undertook her study with a group of 25 adolescent girls and completed the work in 5 months–
- She returned to the US in May 1926–

★ From her research Mead concluded that the behavior of the adolescent girls in Samoa proved to be all about nurture [socialization; cultural construction] and not about nature [biology; genetics]--

★ She also claimed that there were no natural disasters that threatened the island complex and that the general reaction to sex was to have many sexual liaisons while not becoming entangled emotionally–

★ She also claimed that the society as a whole was peaceful to the extreme and lived an idyllic paradise lifestyle–

Upon her return to the US, she produced her doctoral dissertation which was subsequently published as: *Coming of Age in Samoa*–

This book proved to be VERY influential in American Anthropology because it “proved” that behavior is culturally determined. The book was immediately picked up by academic anthros to teach to undergraduate classes–It was taught as absolute truth from the late 1920s to the 1980s.

Along comes Derek Freeman–

➤ As a student in Australia, he first encountered *Coming of Age in Samoa* in the 1940s–

➤ He went to work in Samoa as a teacher and arrived in the same location in the 1940s and remained there for 2 years. During this period, he was in contact with the chiefs and decided that what he was seeing was not what Mead had reported some 15+ years earlier–

➤ He enlisted in the service during WWII and didn't return to Samoa until the 1960s--

★ Freeman became extremely involved with the people and cultural system of Samoa and was named a "talking chief" during his first stay there--

★ His experience of Samoa was one of:

- strict sexual taboos
- The Samoa temperament to be aggressive and angry due to how children are raised--this includes the incident in which cricket players beat a referee to death for bad calls in the 20s and 80s--

• Devout Christianity including all of the hangups that go with it--

1967--Holmes says that Mead's findings were reliable, yet his own fieldwork found the opposite--

1973--Goodman says that Samoans are aggressive as a result of their raising and that they put on a "mask of happiness"--

➤ Samoans themselves were very unhappy about Mead's descriptions--her informants have since admitted to lying to her--as is the custom in Samoa when asked questions about sex and sexuality--and that they never intended for her to take it all so seriously--

Freeman's refutation came in 1981, 3 years after Mead died-- *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of Anthropological Myth* was released in late 1983 and was highly recommended as "holiday reading"--

1983--AAA/Chicago/ voted as a body to reject Freeman's book

2000--There is still repercussions from Freeman's refutation-- dissertations are still being written about the controversy and research on and with the Samoan people continues:

In a recent paper published on goathead.org discusses some conclusions about the ongoing battle waged by Freeman against Mead:

**After examining the evidence it is our conclusion that Margaret Mead was a victim a circumstance. There were many factors influencing her book that were beyond her control such as publishers, society, and her superiors. Although she clearly made some mistakes in her research, the effects of her errors were exaggerated by the popularity of the book and the criticism of Derek Freeman. Likewise, Derek Freeman's analysis of Margaret Meads work was at times harsh, but, this was probably the result of his close emotional ties to the Samoan people. Freeman did succeed in changing the way that many people look at the Samoan culture which was something that somebody had to do. Mead made herself famous by writing a popular book while Derek Freeman gained his reputation and notoriety off of what Margaret Mead had accomplished. Although false scientific research must not go unchecked, Derek Freeman clearly did more than was necessary in refuting Mead's evidence considering the fact that others had already exposed flawa in Meads research decades earlier. (Bender, Humphries, Michael <http://hasmoneaus.jour.sc.edu/papers/2000mead.html>)**

## QUESTIONS:

Why did/does this controversy matter SO much to anthropology and American anthropologists in particular?

What does it say about fieldwork in general?

Fieldwork is essential to the project of Anthropology. Discuss some of the difficulties with the process and product of fieldwork.