

Bursting a south-sea bubble

The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research

by Derek Freeman

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Melvin Konner

The title of this book contains two claims. The first is that Margaret Mead, most acclaimed of American anthropologists, was hoaxed by her own informants during her 1928 field trip to Samoa. In support of this claim, Derek Freeman presents several kinds of evidence. Strongest is that Mead made mistakes in her ethnographic descriptions. Weakest is an interview with an octogenarian religious lady, very distressed by the loose reputation Mead had given Samoan girls. Six decades after the fact, she swore on the Bible that she had deliberately tricked Mead into thinking that she and her even younger friends were over-sexed.

There is not much to be said about this hoax claim except that it may be true. Mead was a young woman, on her first field trip, and she may have been flummoxed by some Samoan teenage girls who told her that their lives were both sexy and free of conflict. Other ethnologists in Samoa, including Lowell Holmes, Paul Shankman, Bradd Shore and Freeman himself, came along later and did better research, correcting Mead's impressions. So much was already true in 1983, when Freeman published *Margaret Mead and the Heretic: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Penguin, 1997).

Scientists make observations. They publish them, sometimes using them to support theories. Other scientists, with different methods and theories, may be sceptical. They repeat the observations. Sometimes they disprove them. They report new observations and different theories. So?

In ethnology there is an additional problem: the subjects of study are intentional agents. They are influenced by being studied — a sort of anthropological uncertainty principle. They can put up a smokescreen, conceal facts, even deliberately mislead observers. Such is the nature of all studies of humans, and it is a source of error in psychology, medicine, demography and other human sciences, as well as ethnology. As post-modernist anthropologists never tire of pointing out, it is difficult to achieve objectivity in ethnographic field studies. So?

Soon after the publication of Freeman's other book about Mead, it became clear that Samoan studies were blessed with a series of talented ethnographers who had already detected and corrected Mead's mistakes. Freeman nicely summarized their work, adding his own very useful observations of



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Duped? But did it matter if Margaret Mead was tricked by her informants on that first field trip?

adolescent development. For example, he showed that the curve for age at first arrest for a crime among Samoan teenagers is virtually identical to that derived from similar studies in England. Thus, when Mead used Samoan teenage life to suggest that adolescent *sturm und drang* was an exclusively Western phenomenon, she was wrong.

Now Freeman has written a new book about Mead, delving more deeply into the historical material. He reviews the history of American cultural anthropology in the period before the Samoan research, and offers rich biographical detail on the young ethnographer, her relations with her famous mentor Franz Boas and other anthropologists, and especially her exuberant and sometimes naive first field trip to Samoa. He attempts to show that Mead was not just mistaken, but was deliberately tricked by her informants. His argument is well developed and to some extent convincing. Although some authorities reject it — notably George Stocking, the leading historian of anthropology, who replied sceptically when Freeman first field-

ed the claim in 1989 — let us say for the sake of the argument that we accept it.

The second claim of the book's title, that Mead's hoaxing was "fateful", is very different. It cannot be sustained by letters from the field, repeat interviews of informants in their old age, or even by follow-up fieldwork. This is not a claim about one scientist's mistake. It is a claim about the history of a discipline, and it is in no way proven in this book.

The gist of it is that Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* profoundly shaped anthropology in the United States, undermining truths about human nature and strengthening falsehoods about the power of culture. There is no doubt that American anthropology during the mid-twentieth century was hostile to generalizations about human nature and biological influences on behaviour. But to attribute this vast *Zeitgeist* to Mead's little 1928 book is untenable. It arose from a sound rejection of nineteenth-century racist theories (stirring again in Europe when Mead's book appeared) and a disenchantment with the view that human flexibility and choice could

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in some way be cut off by biology. It was a broad intellectual thrust throughout the English-speaking world, affecting psychiatry, psychology and education as much as anthropology. Writings by John Dewey, John Watson, B. F. Skinner, Talcott Parsons, Bronislaw Malinowski, Boas (pre-Mead) and M. F. Ashley Montagu were far more influential than Mead's youthful book.

Freeman sees the controversy over that book as overridingly important, saying that "Mead's demonstrably erroneous conclusions about Samoa were seriously questioned for the first time early in 1983. Indeed, before the year was out, the scientific standing of Margaret Mead's Samoan research had become the ruling *cause célèbre* of twentieth-century anthropology." Of course, this exaggerated claim gives Freeman's own 1983 book a crucial role in the modern history of the discipline.

Let me suggest some more plausible candidates for the ruling *cause célèbre* of twentieth-century anthropology: fighting racist theories, demonstrating the flexibility of sex roles, promoting respect for exotic traditions, challenging the ethnocentrism of psychologists, sociologists and historians, fighting colonialism, questioning research methods that 'objectify' non-Western people, preserving disappearing cultures and resisting the generalizations of sociobiology. To every one of these genuine *causes célèbres*, Mead made a significant contribution.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should say that Freeman takes me to task for calling Mead "one of the greatest of all social scientists" and suggesting that she might have deserved the Nobel Prize. I attributed these comments to youthful enthusiasm (they occur in a 1982 book of my own) until I checked the context. I described then-current knowledge of biological bases of human behaviour, and, in the forthcoming second edition, as in the first, my overall viewpoint on this is closer to Freeman's than to Mead's.

Yet I stand by my strong statements about her. As the context makes clear, I was moved to such praise by re-reading Mead's 1948 book *Male and Female*, which includes material not just on Samoa but on seven different traditional cultures she had studied directly. She used ethnographic data from these and other cultures to launch a frontal assault on the then-prevailing Western idea that every major aspect of gender-assigned roles stemmed from biological determinants, and was therefore inevitable and unchangeable.

Today, everyone who is not a religious fundamentalist or an unlettered boob of the male sex agrees that Mead was right and the prevailing idea was wrong. Mead's book, which preceded Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and all the feminist sociology that followed, sowed the seeds of freedom and equal opportunity now enjoyed by millions

of women in the West and, increasingly, by scores of millions throughout the world.

Still, as my use of her work showed, she also provided the facts needed to show some of the *limits* of sex-role variability, especially in physical aggression. This does not change her fundamental conclusions, nor, certainly, the policy implications, but it modifies Mead's view to some extent. What greater tribute could an anthropologist have than to have provided ethnographic data on disappearing cultures that a later author could use to qualify her conclusion? As anthropologist Melvin Ember has said, Mead was a natural historian of human societies. A Nobel Prize went to Niko Tinbergen, Konrad Lorenz and Karl von Frisch in 1973 for work on the natural history of animal behaviour. A Nobel Prize might well have acknowledged Mead's work, which had much further-reaching consequences.

Mead published more than 30 books, of which *Coming of Age in Samoa* was the first and one of the shortest. It was very popular and it made her name, but it does not have the importance Freeman accords it in the history of American anthropology, nor even in Mead's reputation. Through her other books, hundreds of articles, museum exhibits and countless interviews and speeches, she helped make it necessary to consider the habits and practices of non-Western cultures before making generalizations and certainly before making policy.

She promoted breast-feeding when American paediatricians sought to abolish it, and opened the minds of obstetricians about natural childbirth in an era when millions of babies were born heavily sedated. She helped change thinking about child-rearing, education, sex, menopause, ageing and race, based on her own and others' fieldwork in cultures once considered too exotic to be relevant. Mead trained dozens of anthropologists and inspired hundreds of others, many of whom went on to criticize her work and challenge her views. She was opinionated, outspoken

and easy to disagree with. Provoking disagreement was part of her personal style.

She got some things wrong? Mendel recorded data too good to be true, Darwin was a Lamarckian, Freud belittled the importance of child abuse, Einstein rejected quantum theory, Heisenberg opposed "Jewish" physics and Lorenz published a scholarly article claiming that racial mixture was dangerous. Few are willing to dismiss these thinkers or diminish their contributions because of such intellectual, or even moral, lapses. No doubt it is worthwhile to point out the lapses, and it is at least of historical interest to understand how they developed. In this spirit, Freeman has made a worthwhile contribution to the history of anthropology. But Mead's reputation endures. □

Melvin Konner is in the Department of Anthropology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia 30322, USA.