



## The Samoa Reader: Last Word or Lost Horizon?

Ivan Brady

*Current Anthropology*, Volume 32, Issue 4 (Aug. - Oct., 1991), 497-500.

---

Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>, by contacting JSTOR at [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu), or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*Current Anthropology* is published by University of Chicago Press. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

---

*Current Anthropology*  
©1991 University of Chicago Press

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu).

©2001 JSTOR

# Books<sup>1</sup>

---

## *The Samoa Reader: Last Word or Lost Horizon?*

IVAN BRADY

*Department of Anthropology, State University of New York College, Oswego, N.Y. 13126, U.S.A. 11 III 91*

*The Samoa Reader: Anthropologists Take Stock.* Edited by Hiram Caton. New York: University Press of America, 1990. n.p.

In 1925, the 23-year-old American anthropologist Margaret Mead arrived on the island of Ta'u, in American Samoa, to start her first fieldwork. Her ambitious project was to decide if "the disturbances which vex our adolescents [are] due to the nature of adolescence itself or to civilisation" (Mead 1973 [1928]:6). She spent nine months with a study group of about 68 young Samoan girls. Recognizing the scientific control difficulties inherent in such studies and thereby reserving some rights of *ceteris paribus*, she concluded that Samoan youth faced nearly none of the disorientations and disruptions to life and psyche that vexed American youth in their comings of age; that this was largely to be explained by Samoans' relaxed attitudes toward adolescent sexual exploration and intercourse; that the differences between the two societies were testimony to the remarkable plasticity of human behavior; and that that plasticity was testimony to the triumph of culture over nature. Cultural anthropology, psychology, and Western educational systems were put on notice to revise their theories and change their practices: biology was not destiny; racist theories of behavior could be abandoned; educational systems could be revised to accord with the new-found facts of this anthropological psychology; and the nature of adolescent turmoil was really the culture of adolescent turmoil set against a biological problem and therefore learned and shared behavior that could be unlearned, revised, channeled, and managed. Mead published the results of this study in 1928 as *Coming of Age in Samoa* (see also Mead 1969 [1930]). For reasons having to do less with the scientific community's satisfaction with her research than with the public flash of science in paradise,<sup>2</sup> this book became a best seller and launched her on her career as a popular author and lecturer.

1. Permission to reprint items in this section may be obtained only from their authors.

2. Mead's Samoan thesis became famous in part because it was both timely and titillating to the American public. In that connection Freeman makes the indisputable but not very original point

In 1983, Derek Freeman, an Australian anthropologist who has worked in another part of Samoa (the island of Savai'i, Western Samoa) periodically since 1943, published a substantive and theoretical challenge to Mead's thesis called *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Although Mead had been dead for five years, her enormous popularity had kept her work in the public view. In anthropology, her Samoan research was still respected for its pioneering impact on the concept of culture and education and for its sharpening of values the field still holds today concerning culture and racism. It was also recognized as inadequate on several counts (she exaggerated the simplicity of Samoan society, for example, and her delivery of what she called "controlled comparison" science was in the best estimate weak) and had been relegated largely to discussions of disciplinary history by the time Freeman published his critique. So, contrary to Freeman (1984:101, 103, 105, 115), few anthropologists who knew Mead's *Coming of Age* were surprised when he claimed that it had "greatly underestimated the complexity of the culture, society, history, and psychology" of the Samoan people (p. 285).<sup>3</sup> Whether or not it was completely wrong about Samoan adolescence was not easily established, but various critics began to draw the line when it was perceived that Freeman's criticism was itself overdrawn and, despite his disclaimers, a personal attack on Mead.

Freeman found many of Mead's assertions on Samoan character, family values, and sexual behavior "preposterously false" (p. 288). He claimed that her "zealous adherence" to the procedural rule "that one should never look

---

that for "Mead's readers in North America and elsewhere in the Western world, there could be no more plausible location for the idyllic society of which she wrote than in the South Seas, a region that since the days of Bougainville has figured in the fantasies of Europeans and Americans as a place of preternatural contentment and sensual delight" (1984:283).

3. However important and substantial Mead's anthropology (including her more scholarly Samoan ethnography, *Social Organization of Manu'a* [1969], her research on Bali [see Jacknis 1988, Boon 1990] and her important studies in New Guinea [see Tuzin and Schwartz 1980]), and taking into account her many public activities that helped to reinforce the value of anthropology itself and the many cultures represented therein, it is nonetheless true that the anthropological sun does not rise and set in her work—or indeed in that of any single person. The popular press did not understand this as the Freeman-Mead controversy began to unfold, and Freeman, with a vested interest in overestimating his opposition, has never done anything to change this impression. It helps his cause to be perceived as undoing something fundamental to anthropology. Caton's *Reader* includes some discussion of the public perception of Mead and of Freeman's challenge to her Samoan thesis in this regard.

for psychological explanations of social phenomena until attempts at explanation in cultural terms have been exhausted" gave her an unwarranted focus "on the domain of the cultural" that neglected the "much more deeply motivated aspects of Samoan behavior" (p. 301), that is, its psychobiological aspects. Pursuing that idea and its history, he rejected extreme biological determinism as the "unscientific thesis" to which cultural determinism was the equally "unscientific antithesis" and pinned much of the latter's development on Franz Boas and those he influenced (cf. Weiner 1983, Murray 1990). Freeman concluded that the time is ripe in anthropology and biology "for a synthesis in which there will be, in the study of human behavior, recognition of the radical importance of both the genetic and the exogenetic and their interaction, both in the past history of the human species and in our problematic future" (p. 302). A very public controversy ensued. Apart from the red flag of hinted sociobiology in Freeman's thesis (which he continues to deny categorically), if what he was saying about Mead's Samoan project was substantially correct and also anticipated in many ways by anthropologists who were familiar with her work, why was there such a great hue and cry from so many of his readers?

*The Samoa Reader*, edited by Hiram Caton (professor of politics and history at Griffiths University in Australia), contains some answers. As a sample of publications and correspondence concerning the controversy, the material he has collected is impressive—more than 40 authors and about 70 pieces from scholarly publications, newspapers, and so on, to which he has added various introductions and original articles of his own and a substantial bibliography. It is divided (somewhat clumsily) into sections on cultural determinism, methods in ethnography, the history of anthropology, and documentation and the professional ethics involved in getting and using it in Samoan research and in the processing of the debate (including reviews of Freeman's book). I cannot say what all of this is in particular—it is too long and convoluted to be summarized at that level here. I can say that the collection overall gives us a unique glimpse of what we have wrought as participants in and interpreters of the controversy, warts and all, and that Caton's effort has some problems of its own. I shall address a few of the larger ones.<sup>4</sup>

4. A few cryptic complaints on smaller matters will show another side of Caton's editing: (1) His placement and commentary put some of my own work (and that of some other contributors) on an unearned and unwanted intellectual slant. (2) While discussing correspondence I had with Freeman as possibly answering his extravagant claim that the special section I edited on this controversy in the *American Anthropologist* (Brady 1983) had been created by "stealth" (it was created in a production squeeze), Caton (p. 276) misleadingly attributes some of my confidential remarks to a third party. (3) I was not speaking for the "consensus of American anthropology" when I introduced the special section (cf. Caton, p. 42); I noted what was happening and thereafter spoke for myself. (4) To say, as Caton does (p. 68), that Freeman was ever "speaking in the name of the real" is to misinterpret completely my use of the phrase. An editor with more experience in anthropology and less tolerance for coy euphemisms and tedium would have handled these problems differently.

One of these is that Caton attempts to maximize in the *Reader* what is the weakest theme of Freeman's book—his elusive claims of correspondence between particular cultural orientations in Samoa and human biology. As in all such studies, particular correspondences are hard to nail down empirically, so Freeman was out on a limb from the outset of his argument, as was Mead when she denied such connections. Caton notes that "no specific discussion of specific biological methods in anthropology took place" in the Freeman-Mead debate (p. 1) and that Freeman "has not advanced a specific theory of cultural evolution, or of the interaction of a segment of human biology with a segment of culture; nor has he published empirical research describing some specific interaction. The students he trained were not given a distinctive interactionist methodology or problem" (p. 110); nor do we learn from Freeman or the *Reader* how to conduct the "nature/nurture interactionist" research that Freeman espouses. Caton says that Mead's proponents (and, I would add, others, including myself) see Freeman's nature/nurture argument as mostly "old hat," that is, as an argument that, without new forms of evidence linking biology and culture, has an uninteresting future. But even that cleavage is too simple. The argument, as Caton suggests (p. 3), results in a paradox:

We see [in the debate] interactionists who seem to practice what they preach but who say that the new era is only just dawning. Opposing them we see those who deny that there was ever a rejection of biology by cultural anthropology—as witnessed by their own research [in this case, Marvin Harris, Roy Rappaport, and Melvin Ember]—but who yet reject Freeman's proposed assimilation of biology into cultural anthropology as unviable.

Caton hopes that these confusions are nonetheless "fruitful" and that we can move forward with integrating the methods and findings of biology with those of anthropology and the behavioral sciences. He wants to salvage the "biocultural interactionism" from this controversy because "the participants have felt impelled to go to the roots of anthropological thinking and in that way have shown that the controversy is not a curiosity of circumstances but rather that it foreshadows patterns of future development" (p. 3). This optimism may be useful for rejoining the dialogue of biocultural studies, but it also plays directly into Freeman's wobbly position that proposing such a paradigm is new and productive. The proposal is grounded in Freeman's long-term research on aggression, to be sure, but his biological argument does not penetrate to the specific facts and cultural history of particular adolescent behavior in Samoa or anywhere. It is largely deduced from his presumed destruction ("disconfirmation") of Mead's "purely cultural" account. Furthermore, no matter how biological coming-of-age behavior ultimately may prove to be, Occam's razor suggests that we do not need unsubstantiated biocultural claims to show Samoan aggression as counterpoint to Mead's exaggerations. The parsimony

lies elsewhere. Because of that, Caton's flattering portrait of Freeman's development of interest in the "interactionist's paradigm" (pp. 98–112) contributes little of value to the argument. It is not one that students of anthropology will recognize as familiar in the discipline's history in any case. Freeman (1990:326) welcomes this account as accurately summarising his position but then still judges that a major part of it "goes right off the rails" (p. 327). Obviously, the *Reader* is not the place to discover what exactly he means by "biocultural interactionism."

Another aspect of this controversy that adds to its complexity, and that must be considered to make sense of it, is both personal and epistemological: how the arguments have been made is at one level as important as what has been said. Freeman has made it difficult to discuss his work without discussing him, and by including personal correspondence and various refusals and rebuttals the *Reader* makes it even more so. It is clear that Freeman has not always been treated fairly by his opposition and that some of his dramatic responses are at least explainable, if not justifiable, on those grounds. But, as Caton suggests (pp. 4–13), that doesn't begin to explain his vehemence. There is in many of Freeman's responses a verve, a relish of the fight, a sense of retribution far beyond the ordinary. Respondents who try to be objective and detached simply give him the edge for heated argument. The *Reader* contains several examples of that. He conveys the distinct impression in these texts that to disagree with him is to be morally wrong; that failure to process reviews or criticism according to his own peculiar demands makes editors stealthy conspirators;<sup>5</sup> that to be against him is to be somehow locked into an antiquated cultural-determinist model and therefore set against anything biocultural in baseline, theory, or interpretation; that to be an American and disagree with him is to be a blind or deceitful defender of Mead, necessarily contemptuous of Australian colleagues; and so on.

Caton himself argues (pp. 4–13) that Freeman has been on a heroic and highly personalized mission—a "double-edged" quest—to discredit Mead,<sup>6</sup> first on be-

half of what he declares is superior science and second on behalf of some very conservative Samoans who have found Mead's characterizations of their attitudes about sex embarrassing and offensive. The irony in this has its own double dimension: one is Freeman's having such vested interests while criticizing American anthropologists for their lack of objectivity, the other his stating his "plain truth" about Samoa against Mead's and then having that perceived as a characterization some Samoans found equally offensive.

Freeman says that his book, "being specifically a refutation of Mead's conclusions, is not an alternative depiction of Samoa" (1984:xix). It nonetheless depicts Samoa as an aggressive society with significant rates of suicide and rape and violence levels in related categories proportionately greater than those found in the United States. This is not a particularly flattering characterization, of course, especially when weighed against Mead's romanticism, but Freeman finds it necessary "because in science there can be no compromising of the truth for the sake of appearances" (p. xix). He is moved to state as well that "the Samoan people are, in general, a law-abiding, Christian people, of immense character [and] 'shining virtues'" (p. xx). In that connection, however, when Mead's *Coming of Age* is interpreted by some Samoans to mean that Samoan women were "sluts," we have to ask, who is talking here (cf. Wendt in Caton pp. 11–13)? And for whom does Freeman speak, anyway? Has the role of the Samoans in this case been fairly appraised? We need to hear more from them on these matters, and from an anthropology that understands the plurality and mutual construction of its cross-cultural models. The *Reader* is short on discussions of both of these problems.

On the three most important issues raised in this debate—the adequacy of Mead's Samoan ethnography, as a subset of that the issue of adolescence without turmoil, and the history and current placement of biocultural anthropology in ethnography—Freeman's book discovers little but tends to reinforce what many anthropologists already suspected on the first, offers only a weak and imperfect counter to the second, and on the third heralds the advent of a genetic/exogenetic interactionist theory but makes a mature statement of it hard to find. Overall, the *Reader* may be useful for confirming suspicions or resolving certain metaissues for the various combatants. It offers the possibility of seeing some common themes and patterns in the collective arguments that individually remain invisible, thereby bringing the uninformed up to speed with some economy and perhaps surprising scholars who thought they had heard it all by now. But chaos and ambiguity will continue to characterize both the history of the problem and the place of the *Reader* in it.<sup>7</sup>

---

contains strong arguments against Mead's having been fooled by her informants—the upshot being that Mead may have been wrong, but she was not stupid.

7. Caton states at the outset that the *Reader* renews rather than resolves much of the original controversy (p. 1), but even that is

5. A careful reading of the *Reader* suggests that Freeman's self-declared "fundamental right of simultaneous reply" to printed reviews of his work (which of course he denied to Mead by waiting until after her death to publish his challenge) is merely a cover for trying to head off criticism. In one case in the *Reader* where Freeman did get such access, Jeannette Mageo wrote to him seeking his comments on a draft exploration of his and Mead's work in an ethological framework. He accused her of planting "disinformation" and threatened her with a complaint to the Ethics Committee of the American Anthropological Association unless she revised her arguments. Outcome: she disagreed but addressed his concerns and he didn't complain further (see Caton, pp. 295–96).

6. A similar thought occurs when one sees a teary Freeman sitting in a circle of Samoans, having fought the good fight, at the conclusion of a recent film on the debate, *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (see Kuper 1989). The jacket for this film says that it "presents startling new evidence that may resolve once and for all one of the greatest controversies in the history of anthropology." This so-called evidence is testimony from a Samoan woman that Mead was duped into believing the rosy picture she painted of Samoan adolescence, that she was taken in by sexual-reference joking, etc. The *Reader*

Given that the last productive word has not yet been spoken on these matters and that, for both theoretical and historical reasons, it may never be, it is appropriate to ask what we have learned about the process. That the politics of the message and the metamessage can override the art and the science and hence the disciplinary value of the study? That there is no last word on anything? That we will never agree on how to agree? The more this debate is pressed and diced from different angles, the more apparent it becomes that there is no single issue and that there will be no monological resolution to what seems to bother us. The close look at Samoa has raised far more questions than it has answered. But that doesn't necessarily make Samoa an exception. This is not unusual anthropology; it is merely anthropology pushed to extreme notice. It shows that we will never get our "peoples" into our books completely. Ethnography by definition is incomplete, and it can also be wrong. Unfortunately, it is often hard to tell which is which in the Freeman-Mead debate.

Romanucci-Ross (1991) suggests that such ambiguities point to a need for a broader view than is presented by the "old-questions" field in which Freeman joined battle with Mead. It might also pay to reread Mead and Freeman in relation to the selections in the *Reader*—not to mention Lowell Holmes, Bradd Shore, and other experts on the area—since none encapsulates the others completely on matters of Samoan ethnography or ethnological theory. The *Reader* also makes it clear that Freeman knows much more about Samoa than he has told us in his Mead papers. Getting on with that might go a long way toward rescuing the controversy from its present lost horizon—from the quest for a Samoa that used to be, or perhaps never was, as calculated through a gunfight over culture and nature.

Finally, it is worth noting that while all of this was happening, some of the original story quietly moved. In 1989, Martha Ward, professor of anthropology at the University of New Orleans, published a book called *Nest in the Wind: Adventures in Anthropology on a Tropical Island*. It is a popularized account of her life on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei while she conducted research there with her husband in the 1970s. It is not an exact extension of Mead's genre or thesis, but Ward argues convincingly that these islanders "have exceptionally relaxed attitudes toward sex." It would help to have a more formal statement of her ethnography before making a firm judgment, of course; but there is no reason to doubt her assertion at this point and every reason to suspect that this circumstance mitigates some of the difficulties faced by Pohnpeian adolescents compared with those who come of age in places with less relaxed attitudes about such things. Whether her account can

actually be extended to support or deny a scientific claim of less troublesome adolescence on Pohnpei than elsewhere remains to be determined. However, without Freeman's tactics to distort the issues, the artful science of this problem has a better prospect of limiting itself to more focused queries and satisfactions and thereby of eliminating many of the disturbances that have characterized the Samoan brouhaha. A change of provenance for one of Mead's larger problems might thus be the path to a more acceptable resolution of it.

## References Cited

- BOON, J. 1990. *Affinities and extremes: Crisscrossing the bitter-sweet ethnology of East Indies history, Hindu-Balinese culture, and Indo-European allure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BRADY, I. Editor. 1983. Speaking in the name of the real: Freeman and Mead on Samoa. *American Anthropologist* 85:908–47.
- FREEMAN, D. 1984. *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth*. New York: Penguin.
- . 1990. "Clarification on sociobiology," in *The Samoa reader*. Edited by Hiram Caton. New York: University Press of America.
- HAYLES, N. K. 1990. *Chaos bound: Orderly disorder in contemporary literature and science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- JACKNIS, I. 1988. Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali: Their use of photography and film. *Cultural Anthropology* 3:160–77.
- KUPER, A. 1989. Coming of age in anthropology? *Nature* 6:453–55.
- MEAD, M. 1969 (1930). *Social organization of Manu'a*. Honolulu: B. P. Bishop Museum.
- . 1973 (1928). *Coming of age in Samoa*. New York: American Museum of Natural History.
- MURRAY, S. 1990. Problematic aspects of Freeman's account of Boasian culture. *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* 4:401–7.
- ROMANUCCI-ROSS, L. 1991. "Telling tales of the South Pacific," in *Anthropological poetics*. Edited by Ivan Brady. Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- TUZIN, D. F., AND T. SCHWARTZ. 1980. Margaret Mead in New Guinea: An appreciation. *Oceania* 14:241–47.
- WARD, M. 1989. *Nest in the wind: Adventures in anthropology on a tropical island*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland.
- WEINER, A. 1983. Ethnographic determinism: Samoa and the Margaret Mead controversy. *American Anthropologist* 85:909–19.

## The Spatial Projection of Social Relations in Fiji

MARY DOUGLAS

22 Hillway, London N6 6QA, England. 10 v 91

*Making Sense of Hierarchy: Cognition as Social Process in Fiji*. By Christina Toren. London: Athlone Press, 1990. 287 pp. £35

Christina Toren's *Making Sense of Hierarchy* could be important, for it relates something about cognition not generally accepted in psychology: that cognitive processes are fully informed by social structure. It is not,

ambiguous and misses a larger contemporary question: With all of its many parts, does the *Reader* confirm the disorder and chaos of the debate, thereby signaling the "defeat of totalizing projects," or does it order the chaos by naming its properties and their motions, thereby bringing it "within rational compass" (see Hayles 1990:xiv)? That it appears to do both at different levels is worthy of further commentary.