

In our May/June 1999 issue we published a Follow-up column by anthropologist Derek Freeman titled "On the Ethics of Skeptical Inquiry." Freeman submitted it in critical response to two articles published under the collective heading "The Mead-Freeman Controversy: A Fresh Look" in our November/December 1998 issue. The authors of those two articles, James Côté and Paul Shankman, also provided brief responses to Freeman published in the same issue in which his appeared. The March/April 1999 and May/June 1999 issues included a variety of letters to the editor commenting on the controversy. Here now Freeman provides another take on one of the fundamental contentions of the controversy. Côté and Shankman then briefly respond.—EDITOR

Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Boasian Culturalism: A Brief Report

DEREK FREEMAN

I write to inform you of the recent discovery of fundamentally important new historical evidence about the anthropological fieldwork that Margaret Mead carried out in American Samoa in 1926.

This crucially important evidence is contained in a little-known book entitled *All True! The Record of Actual Adventures That Have Happened To Ten Women of Today* that was published in New York in 1931 by Brewer, Warren, and Putnam. The "adventure" by "Dr. Margaret Mead" (pp. 94–118) is entitled "Life as a Samoan Girl." It begins with a reference to "the group of reverend scientists" who in 1925 sent her to study (Mead 1925) "the problem of which phenomena of adolescence are culturally and which physiologically determined" among the adolescent girls of Samoa, with "no very clear idea" of how she was "to do this." It ends with an account of her journey to the islands of Ofu and Olosega in March of 1926 with the "two Samoan girls," as she calls them, Fa'apua'a and Fofoa. In fact, Fa'apua'a and Fofoa were both twenty-four years of age and slightly older than Mead herself. Mead continues her account of her visit to the islands with Fa'apua'a and Fofoa by stating: "In all things I had behaved as a Samoan, for only so, only by losing my identity, as far as possible, had I been able to become acquainted with the Samoan girls, receive their whispered confidences, and learn at the same time the answer to the scientists' questions."

This account, by Mead herself, is fully confirmed by the sworn testimony of Fa'apua'a (cf. Freeman, 1998, Chapter 11). It can be found on page 141 of the second and paperback edition (1999) of *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead*. It is definitive historical evidence that establishes that Martin Orans was in outright error in asserting (1996, 92) that it is "demonstrably false that Mead was taken in by Fa'apua'a and Fofoa." It is also evidence that establishes that *Coming of Age in Samoa*, far from being a "scientific classic" (as Mead herself supposed) is, in certain vitally significant respects (as in its dream-like second chapter), a work of anthropological fiction.

In 1928, in Chapter 13 of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead concluded, unreservedly, that the phenomena of adolescence are due not to physiology but to the "social environment." This extreme environmentalist conclusion was very much to the liking of Franz Boas, "the father of American anthropology," who was both the sponsor and the supervisor of Mead's Samoan researches. In 1934, in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (13:34) Boas asserted that "the genetic elements which may determine personality" are "altogether irrelevant as compared with the powerful influence of the cultural environment." This is a succinct statement of the Boasian culturalism that "from the late 1920s" became, in the words of George Stocking (1973, 86) "fundamental

to all American social science."

In Samoa, Mead had acted as Boas's agent and, having been given Boas's enthusiastic commendation, *Coming of Age in Samoa* became one of the most influential texts of the twentieth century. We now know from detailed historical research that the extreme environmentalist conclusion to which Dr. Mead came in *Coming of Age in Samoa* is based on evidence that is quite unacceptable scientifically. Furthermore, in the light of present day knowledge (cf. Ridley 1999), this also applies to Boasian culturalism, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century has become a scientifically unacceptable belief system.

This liberating change in the zeitgeist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is evident in the fact that the Intercollegiate Studies Institute of Wilmington, Delaware, in listing the fifty worst and best books of the century has judged Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, with its approving foreword by Franz Boas, to be the "very worst" book of the twentieth century.

References

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Derek Freeman is in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies' Institute of Advanced Studies at The Australian National University.

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James Côté and Paul Shankman Respond

More of the Same

As promised in a previous issue (May/June 1999), I have now made available the primary sources that Derek Freeman has been selectively offering as evidence that Margaret Mead was hoaxed.

This includes excerpts from *All True*, which Freeman claims contains Mead's admission to this effect (it does not—he is continuing his practice of selective citation and misrepresentation of sources). I will not take up valuable space here to deal with the many problems with Freeman's claims. Instead, readers can consult the Web site I have created that provides the primary sources most pertinent to Mead's Samoa research: www.sscl.uwo.ca/sociology/mead/index.htm.

In addition, readers are directed to a special issue of the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (Fall 2000) that includes in-depth critical analyses of Freeman's claims about Mead's supposed hoaxing, her relationship with Franz Boas, and Mead's and Boas's position on cultural and biological influences on behavior. The group of scholars contributing to that journal issue are unanimous in the view that Freeman has seriously misrepresented Mead's Samoan research and its influence.

The fact that Freeman finds solace in an endorsement from the conservative Intercollegiate Studies Institute for his smearing of (the liberal) Margaret Mead speaks for itself. It is telling, though, that they did not put any of Freeman's books on their pet list of the fifty best books of the twentieth century. Mead's book was not among the best of the twentieth century, but it is clearly among the most provocative, as the continuing attention to it in the twenty-first century attests.

Professor James Côté
Editor, *Identity*
Department of Sociology
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

Mead-Freeman: The Never-Ending Controversy

Once again Derek Freeman is arguing that Margaret Mead was "hoaxed" about Samoan sexual conduct by two young women. He believes that his recent "discovery" of an autobiographical chapter by Mead provides "direct evidence" of the alleged hoax in her own words. Yet Freeman quotes only a relevant single sentence from her chapter in an adventure book written primarily for young women. In this sentence, Mead states that she became acquainted with "the Samoan girls" and received "their whispered confidences." Freeman interprets this sentence as "definitive historical evidence" of hoaxing by taking these very general phrases and assuming that they have very particular meanings.

Freeman assumes that the phrase "their whispered confidences" refers to innocent lies about sex allegedly told to Mead by two young Samoan women, Fa'apua'a and Fofoa. However, in Mead's chapter there is no discussion of sexual conduct; "their whispered confidences" does not refer to any particular aspect of Samoan culture. Freeman also assumes that "the Samoan girls" refers exclusively to Fa'apua'a and Fofoa, but the phrase is used elsewhere in the chapter without reference to these two young women.

Thus there is no "direct historical evidence" of hoaxing in the chapter.

Freeman first claimed over a decade ago that Fa'apua'a's sworn testimony showed Mead was hoaxed. Martin Orans (1996) effectively questioned this argument by noting that if Fa'apua'a, herself a ceremonial virgin (or *taupou*), had told Mead that girls "spent nights with boys," and if Mead had believed her, then Mead would have written in *Coming of Age in Samoa* that ceremonial virgins engaged in premarital sex. Instead, she wrote that the entire village protected the virginity of *taupou*. Therefore, while girls may have told Mead innocent lies, there is no evidence in Mead's writing that she believed them. Hence there is no evidence of successful hoaxing.

In his most recent book, Freeman (1999) claimed that a letter from Mead to Boas provided new "smoking gun" evidence of hoaxing. Orans (1999) demonstrated that Freeman had selectively quoted the letter, thereby misreading it. Now Freeman is offering Mead's chapter as further evidence of hoaxing, but Freeman, once again, has selectively quoted and misread the evidence.

As for the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which deemed *Coming of Age in Samoa* the worst book of the twentieth century, this organization may, with Freeman, wish to believe that Mead's book was an intellectual disaster. The ISI is free to do so. But the Institute's use of Freeman's deeply flawed argument about hoaxing does not add to its credibility or Freeman's.

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Paul Shankman
Department of Anthropology
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado