

# Coming to terms with Samoa?

*Social anthropologists seem bent on having a row among themselves about the late Margaret Mead's monumental study. And not before time. But anthropology as such need not be damaged.*

Samoa is not a place but a collection of islands and, worse still, is in the western Pacific. That is the first truth to acknowledge about the latest quarrel to divide the social anthropologists: hardly anybody has been there or can expect to be carried there by chance, as were the early Polynesians. There are, however, two notable visitors to the place — the late Ms Margaret Mead, who wrote a book called *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and now (his book is not yet published but merely publicized in advance) Dr Derek Freeman, emeritus professor of anthropology at the Australian National University, Canberra, Ms Mead set out to change the world, and more or less succeeded. Professor Freeman would change it back again, but only time will tell whether he can manage that.

Ms Mead was twenty-three when she first reached the island of Tau, in the Manu'a Archipelago. A student, even a protégée of Franz Boas, one of those who had the flair to recognize that there is a problem called social anthropology and the daring to suppose that cultural differences are culturally determined, Ms Mead reached Samoa more than half a century ago in a revolutionary state of mind. She had no ambition to change Samoa, but she sought desperately to illuminate, perhaps even to reform, her own society in the United States by what she had to say. To those who knew her, Ms Mead was always something of a paradox — always persuaded that when the facts were discovered, they would bolster up what she knew to be true.

By all accounts, Professor Freeman has followed the unkindest course and taken Ms Mead at her own valuation, arguing that it is false. In due course, his book will be formally reviewed, when it will be possible for readers who have not read it to tell what to make of it; meanwhile, Freeman's pulling of rank on Mead is telling; he claims to have been adopted as a stepson by a Samoan chief, and complains that Mead never lived in a leaky Samoan hut. Worse still, and much more telling, Freeman says that Mead misinterpreted what she was told by the Samoan adolescent girls whom she interrogated. Not merely, he says, did the experiment interfere with its subject, but it was part of it. Ms Mead was told what she said (in her broken Polynesian) she wanted to be told.

Ms Mead is dead, while Professor Freeman (emeritus already?) is no chicken. So why not let the quarrel rest? Freeman's

answer would be that for social anthropologists, the issue is too important. So it is for the rest of us. For whatever she may have intended on her first visit to Samoa, Margaret Mead's account has had a disastrous influence. Its simple message is that that are other societies, so well described that they can only be supposed to be *better* societies, in which adolescent girls live by their libidos, magically hardly ever become pregnant and nevertheless mature to become members of adult society driven by a sense of ritual. Rousseau's noble savage is by comparison merely a second-class citizen.

Freeman's case is strong. After half a century of hard work by social anthropologists, it is clear that Ms Mead's account of Samoa in the 1920s is incomplete even if not downright wrong. The index to *Coming of Age in Samoa* refers to funeral ceremonies only on the last page of the text, where it is in passing mentioned that people cut down plantations when about to bury their dead. Which modern social anthropologist would visit an uncharted place and fail to check the box on his questionnaire dealing with the disposal of the dead? Instead, Ms Mead half a century and more ago seems to have concentrated on the sexual proclivities of a score of teenage girls. In doing so, she broke new ground in social anthropology, and afterwards helped to change the sexual mores of the society from which she came. That she may have had no compelling evidence for her position in either of these intellectual revolutions is beside the point; Margaret Mead was so often sure that she was right, and so able to persuade others of the truth as she saw it, that the need for evidence must have been an encumbrance.

Several lines of evidence bear out this hard judgement, the chief of which is her own opinion. The first half-sentence of the narrative of *Coming of Age in Samoa* is "The life of the day begins at dawn . . .". When else, anywhere? Then, of Samoa, "under historical conditions very different from those which made Greece and Rome flourish and fall, groups of human beings have worked out patterns of life so different from our own that we cannot venture any guess that they would have arrived at our solutions". Really, even if the conditional is removed? And finally, "Samoa knows one way of life and teaches it to her children: will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our

children free to choose among them?"

Among social anthropologists, Ms Mead's position has always been clear. A disciple of Boas, she was always an out-and-out culturalist, equally impatient with physiology and psychology and especially so with Freud. In her heyday, in the 1920s, Mead's jejune glimpse of Samoa (she was there for nine months on her first visit) had much to teach her contemporaries. But the professional wars that she was fighting have long since ended in professional compromise — each side's acknowledgement that its standpoint has been too narrow. If Professor Freeman's book tells us no more (and we shall have to wait and see) it will be a disappointment.

By all accounts, Freeman has other fish to fry. While his criticisms of Mead's work in Samoa are largely professional and methodological, the driving force for his scholarship seems to be resentment of Mead's easy success in changing the society in which she lived. In this respect, Freeman may give social anthropology, his own discipline, too little credit. For who is to say at this late stage that Mead was less a prisoner of the society from which she embarked to Samoa in the 1920s than the Samoans themselves? A child of Prohibition (and its attendant violence), it is natural that she should have found tranquillity in the south-west Pacific. With the Depression apparently cured by the New Deal, it is natural that she should have afterwards preached permissiveness (Samoan style), espoused liberal causes such as feminism and the banning of the bomb and have become a *guru* for the young (and so, by extension, somewhat intolerant of adults). But why so? The explanation is less likely to be found in Samoa than on Mead's native heath.

For anthropologists as such, the issue that has blown up around Ms Mead's original investigation in Samoa, and her popular account of it, is probably unimportant. While techniques have enormously improved in the past half century, it is even more important that people working in the field have learned how many are the pitfalls that confront them, and to the discovery of which Ms Mead has unwittingly made powerful contributions. Her agenda was correct: "a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinise more steadily . . . our own". She may have gone too far by asking that it should then be possible "to judge".