

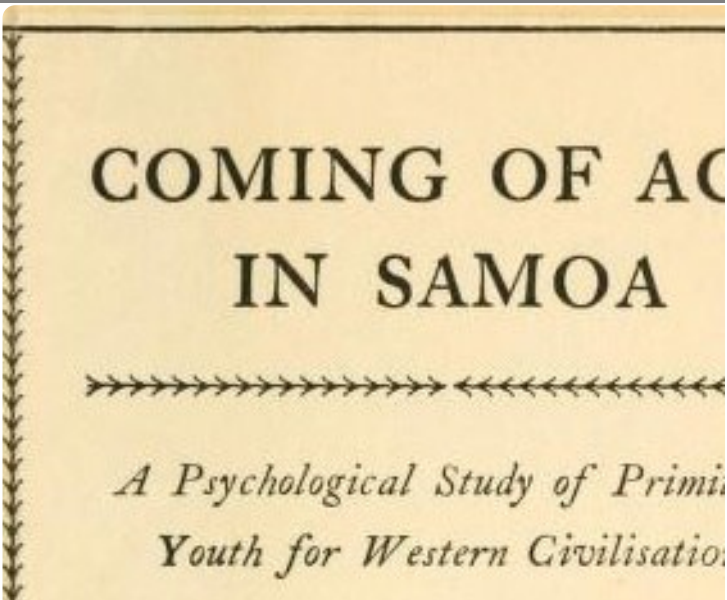
Coming of Age in Samoa

Coming of Age in Samoa is a book by American anthropologist Margaret Mead – primarily adolescent girls – on the island of Ta'u in the Samoan Islands. The book describes the Samoan society in the early 20th century, and theorizes that culture has a less

First published in 1928, the book launched Mead as a pioneering researcher in the world. Since its first publication, *Coming of Age in Samoa* was the most widely read book in the world. [Napoleon Chagnon's](#) *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* overtook it. The book has generated a great deal of controversy on questions pertaining to society, culture, and science. It is also a key text in discussions on issues relating to family, adolescence, gender, and social structure.

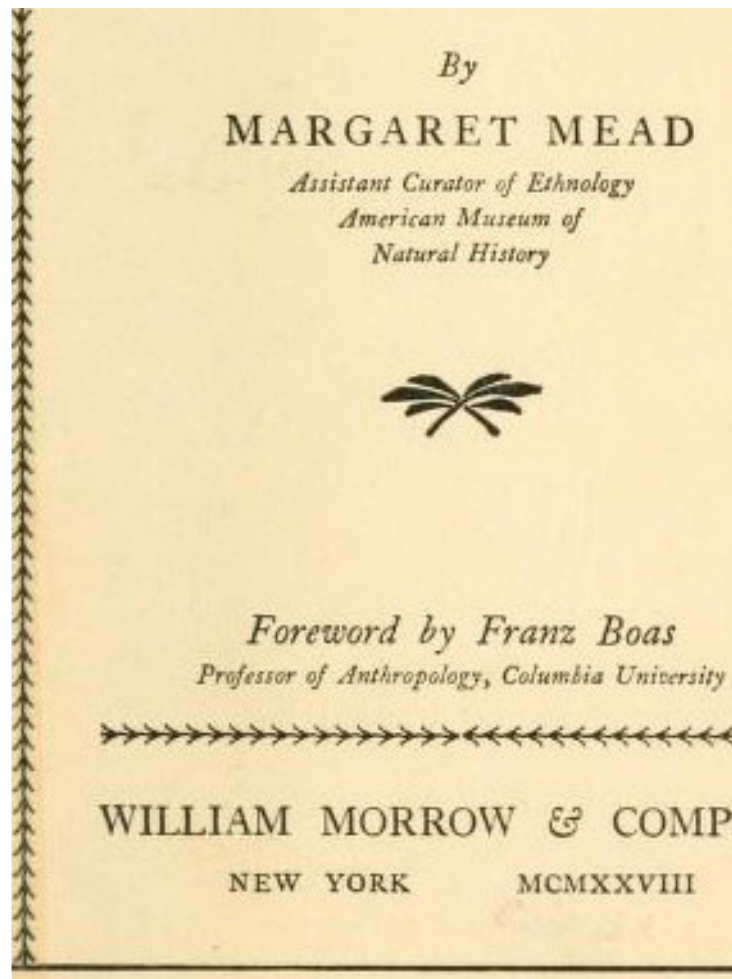
In the 1980s, [Derek Freeman contested](#) many of Mead's claims, and argued that she was biased, believing that Samoan culture had more relaxed sexual norms than Western culture. On the whole, the academic community has rejected Freeman's claims, concluding that Freeman cherry-picked data to support Mead's research and the interviews that he conducted. ^{[3][4][5]}

Coming of Age in Samoa

The image shows the front cover of the book 'Coming of Age in Samoa' by Margaret Mead. The cover is a light beige or cream color with a decorative border of small, repeating floral or geometric motifs. The title 'COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA' is printed in a large, bold, serif font. Below the title, there is a decorative horizontal line with a central floral motif. Underneath this line, the subtitle 'A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation' is written in a smaller, italicized serif font.

COMING OF AGE
IN SAMOA

*A Psychological Study of Primitive
Youth for Western Civilisation*

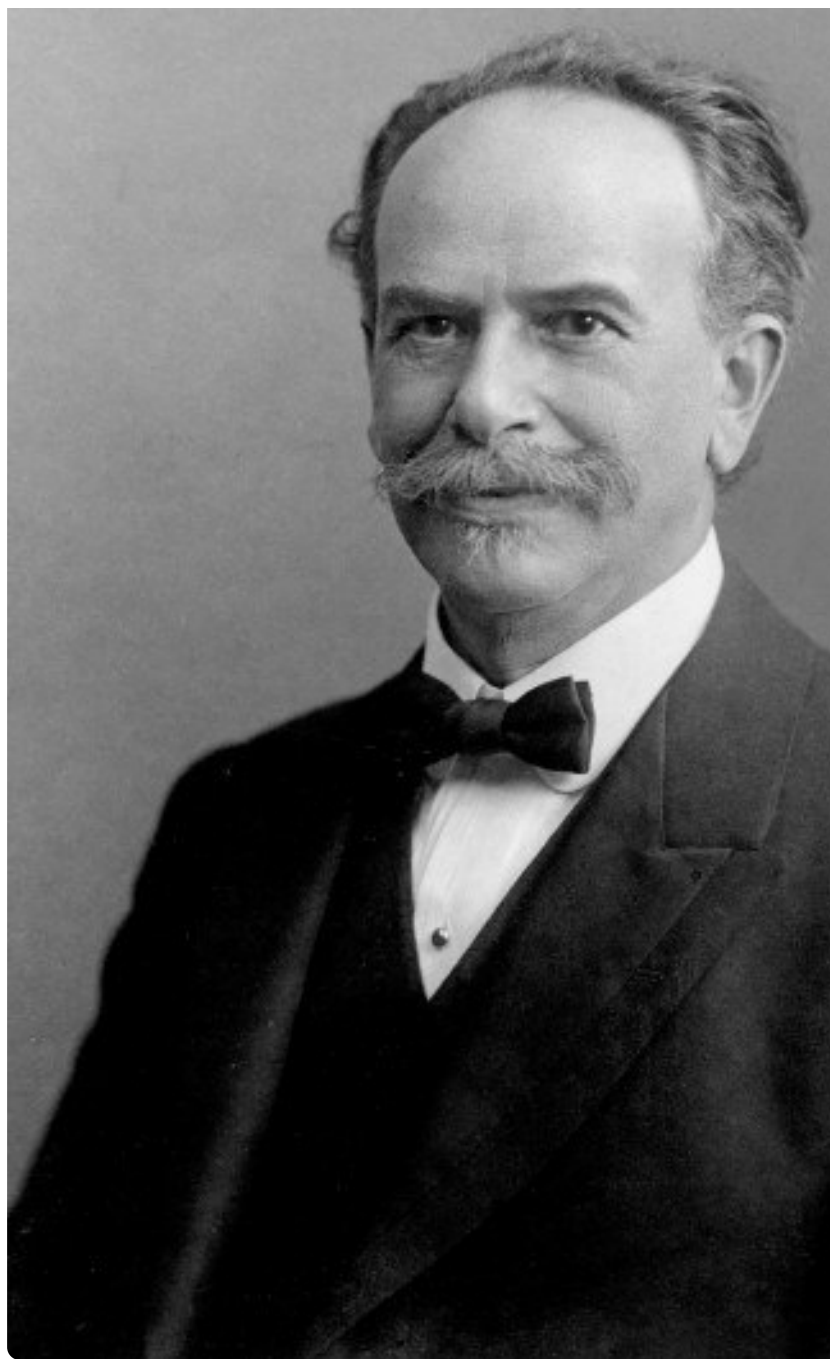


Original title page (1928)

Author	Margaret Mead
Country	United States
Language	English
Subject	Samoan culture and society
Publisher	William Morrow and Co.
Publication date	1928
Media type	Print (Paperback)
Pages	297

Content

Foreword



Franz Boas (ca 1915, age 57)

In the foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead's advisor, [Franz Boas](#), writes:

"Courtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards are not universal. Modesty, good manners, and definite ethical standards is not universal. It is instituted in unexpected ways."^[6]

Boas went on to point out that, at the time of publication, many Americans had

people (particularly women) as they pass through [adolescence](#) as "unavoidable" of the problems faced by adolescents in another culture would be illuminating.

Introduction



Margaret Mead (ca 1930 to 1950, age 30s or 40s)

Mead introduces the book with a general discussion of the problems facing the various approaches to understanding these problems: religion, philosophy, education, etc. She discusses the limitations in each approach and then introduces the new field of [anthropology](#) for analyzing social structures and dynamics. She contrasts the methodology of psychology of behavior and the obvious reasons that controlled experiments are so much more common in the natural sciences. For this reason her methodology is one of studying societies in the field. Instead of a culture that is fairly well understood such as Europe or America, she chooses a culture radically different from Western culture and likely to yield more useful data and a new complexity in that she must first understand and communicate to her readers rather than delve directly into issues of adolescence as she could in a more familiar culture. [Samoa](#) she will delve into the specifics of how adolescent education works in that culture and contrast it with Western culture.

Mead described the goal of her research as follows:

"I have tried to answer the question which sent me to Samoa: Are the disturbances of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence

To answer this question, she conducted her study among a small group of Samoan on the island of [Ta'u](#), in which, over a period of between six and nine months, she got to know (having learnt some Samoan) 68 young women between the ages of 9 and 20. She studied their social structures and dynamics, rituals, etiquette, etc.^[7]

Samoa life and education



Samoa girls (c. 1902)

Mead begins with the description of a typical idyllic day in Samoa. She then c of children, which is celebrated with a lengthy ritual feast. After birth, howev ignored, for girl children sometimes explicitly ritually ignored, after birth up to disciplining children. Most involve some sort of [corporal punishment](#), such as

disciplining children. Most involve some sort of [corporal punishment](#), such as

However, the punishment is mostly ritualistic and not meant to inflict serious meaningful work from a very early age. Initially, young children of both sexes older, however, the education of the boys shifts to fishing, while the girls for age for the Samoans is not the same as in the West. Samoans do not keep track of actual number of years alive, but rather on the outward physical changes in the she gets more work and responsibility.

Mead describes some specific skills the children must learn related to weaving interjects the first description of Samoan sexuality, saying that in addition to interest is expended on clandestine sex adventures." This comes directly after reputation for laziness can make an adolescent girl a poor candidate for marriage more important criterion for marriage than virginity.

Male adolescents undergo various kinds of both encouragement and punishment. Males have many different possible jobs (e.g., "a house builder, a fisherman, Status is also a balance between prowess and achievement and appearing humorous exploits".

For the adolescent girls, status is primarily a question of whom they will marry before marriage as the high point of a Samoan girl's life:

"But the seventeen year old girl does not wish to marry – not yet. It is better to of experience. This is the best period of her life."^[8]

Samoan household





Three Samoan women preparing to make [kava](#) (c. 1890)

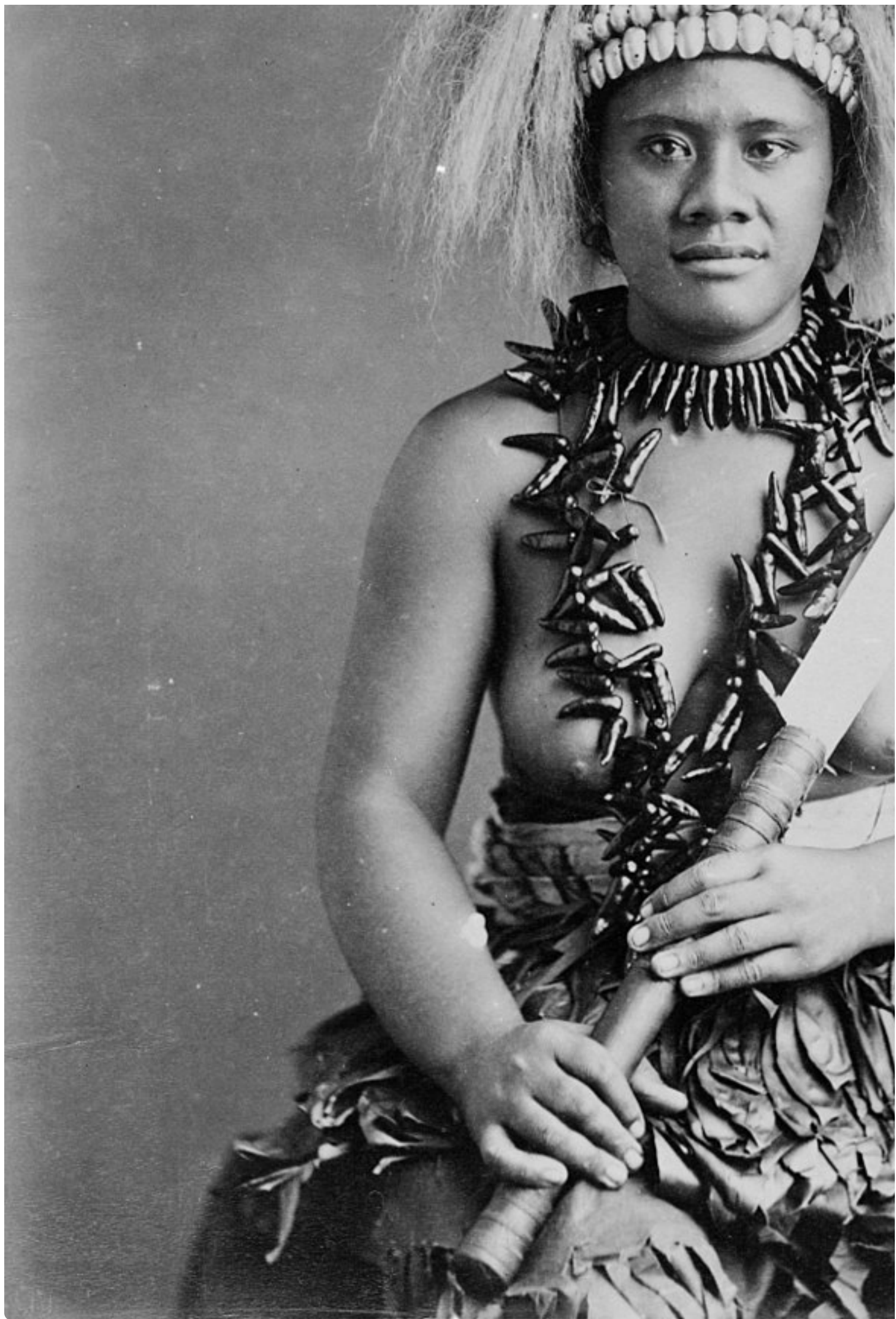
The next section describes the structure of a Samoan village: "a Samoan village consists of many households, each of which is presided over by a head man". Each household includes widowers. The household shares houses communally: each household has se

permanent residence of any specific building. The houses may not all be with

The head man of the household has ultimate authority over the group. Mead
security and safety for Samoan children. Children are likely to be near relatives
missing will be missed quite rapidly. The household also provides freedom for
girl is unhappy with the particular relatives she happens to live with, she can
the same household. Mead also describes the various and fairly complex status
such as role in the household, the household's status within the village, the a
rules of etiquette for requesting and granting favors.^[9]

Samoan social structures and rules





Samoaan female ceremonial dancer (Thomas Andrew, c. 1890s)

Mead describes the many group structures and dynamics within Samoaan culture of Samoaan life from early childhood when young children form groups for play. She lists a number of possible group structures in Samoaan culture. Relations flow down from chief to another man to be their aid and surrogate in courting rituals; men form groups for play and form groups based on tasks such as child caring and household relations. Mead describes the complex rules that govern how they are formed and how they function for both boys and girls, but as elsewhere she needs to also describe Samoaan social structures.

Mead believes that the complex and mandatory rules that govern these various groups are a key concept of friendship as a bond entered into voluntarily by two people with common interests. She describes Samoaan girls: "friendship is so patterned as to be meaningless. I once asked a girl what she was always upon the most uncertain and irritated terms was a friend of her father's and my father's mother's father were brothers."

The ritual requirements (such as being able to remember specifics about far more than women. This also translates into significantly more responsibility being placed on men. Adultery with a chief's wife was beaten and banished, sometime even drowned. A woman who was only cast out by her husband".

Mead devotes a whole chapter to Samoaan music and the role of dancing and singing, which are significant because they violate the norms of what Samoans define as good behavior. Music is a unique outlet for Samoans to express their individuality. According to Mead, dancing is a demonstration of pride, or as the Samoans describe it, "presuming" when it comes to singing and dancing. In these activities, individuality and creativity are encouraged, and children are free to express themselves to the fullest extent of their capabilities. Mead describes appropriate behavior based on age and status:



The attitude of the elders toward precocity in ... singing or dancing, is in striking form of precocity. On the dance floor the dreaded accusation "You are presuming" would be rebuked or whipped for such behavior on any other occasion are allowed to take the limelight without a word of reproach. The relatives crowd with delight on their heads in shame were it displayed in any other sphere ... Often a dancer does not avoid continually colliding with them. It is a genuine orgy of aggressive individualism.

Personality, sexuality, and old age





Samoa women in traditional dress (c. 1910s)

Mead describes the psychology of the individual Samoan as being simpler, more than the west. She describes Samoans as being much more comfortable with about [non-monogamous](#) sexual relations.^[11] Part of the reason for this is the conflicts that might result in arguments or breaks within a traditional Western society simply by having one of the parties to the conflict relocate to a different household or village.^[12] Another reason Mead cites is that Samoans do not seem eager to describe how one of the things that made her research difficult was that Samoans often respond to a question with non-committal answers, the Samoan equivalent to shrugging one's shoulders.

Mead concludes the section of the book dealing with Samoan life with a description of the young men, who she says "are usually more of a power within the household than the old men. They hold their titles, but their wives and sisters rule by force of personality and knowledge."

Educational problems: American and Samoan contrasts







Portrait of three Samoan girls (Thomas Andrew, c. 1890s)

Mead concluded that the passage from childhood to adulthood (adolescence) was marked by the emotional or psychological distress, anxiety, or confusion seen in the Samoan girls.

Mead concluded that this was due to the Samoan girls belonging to a stable, traditional culture with clear social models, and where nothing concerning the basic human facts of copulation, marriage, and childbearing was hidden from them. A Samoan girl was not pressured to choose from among a variety of conflicting influences. Mead commented, somewhat satirically:

... [an American] girl's father may be a Presbyterian, an imperialist, a vegetarian, a follower of [Edmund Burke](#), a believer in the open shop and a high tariff, who believes that women should wear corsets, not roll their stockings, not smoke, nor go riding with young men in the park; her mother is an Episcopalian, a believer in high living, a strong advocate of States' Rights and the right to musical shows and horse races. Her aunt is an agnostic, an ardent advocate of socialism, and her hopes on [Esperanto](#), is devoted to [Bernard Shaw](#), and spends her spare time reading the works of whom she admires exceedingly, has just spent two years at [Oxford](#). He is an Anglo-Catholic, medieval, writes mystical poetry, reads [Chesterton](#), and means to devote his life to the study of the Holy Glass. Her mother's younger brother...^[14]

Reception

On publication, the book generated a great deal of coverage both in the academic press and popular media. The publisher ([William Morrow](#)) had lined up many endorsements from well known anthropologist [Bronislaw Malinowski](#) and psychologist [John Watson](#). Their praise was a major public relations strategy to draw attention to the book. Academic interest was soon followed by sensationalist headlines such as "Where Neuroses Cease".^[15]

Impact on anthropology

For most anthropologists before Mead, detailed immersive fieldwork was not the norm. Reviews of her work have revealed faults by the standards of modern anthropology. Her idea of living with native people was fairly ground breaking. The use of cross-cultural comparison between Western society was highly influential and contributed greatly to the heightening of ethnographic study in the United States. It established Mead as a substantial figure in the field who would maintain for the next fifty years.^[16]

Social influences and reactions

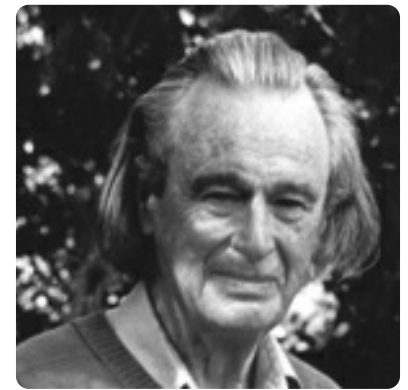
As Boas and Mead expected, this book upset many Westerners when it first came out. It was shocked by her observation that young Samoan women deferred marriage for years before eventually choosing a husband. As a landmark study regarding sexual mores, it came under attack on ideological grounds. For example, the [National Catholic](#) magazine accused Mead of projecting merely a projection of her own sexual beliefs and reflected her desire to eliminate gender inequality. The [Intercollegiate Studies Institute](#) listed *Coming of Age in Samoa* as #1 on its "Top 100 Books of the Century".^[18]

Critique of Mead's methodology and conclusions

Although *Coming of Age* received significant interest and praise from the academic community, its methodology also came in for criticism from several reviewers and fellow anthropologists.

separating her personal speculation and opinions from her ethnographic descriptions and generalizations based on a relatively short period of study. For example, Nelson (2002) says the book is somewhat of [sic] a disappointment. It lacks a documentary base. In her description. Dr. Mead forgets too often that that she is an anthropologist and not a novelist." [19] Shortly after Mead's death, Derek Freeman published a book, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, which failed to apply the scientific method and that her assertions were unsupported. See the section below. [20]

The Mead–Freeman controversy



Derek Freeman

In 1983, five years after Mead had died, Derek Freeman – a New Zealand anthropologist – published *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, which questioned her findings. In 1988, he participated in the filming of *Margaret Mead in Samoa*, a documentary that documented one of Mead's original informants, now an elderly woman, swearing that Mead's claim that Mead when they were teenagers was false; one of the girls would say of Mead:

We girls would pinch each other and tell her we were out with the boys. We were not. Samoan girls are terrific liars and love making fun of people but Margaret thought we were not.

Another of Mead's statements on which Freeman focused was her claim that

could and do lie about their status of virginity.^[22] Freeman pointed out that v Samoan men that they have a specific ritual in which the bride's [hymen](#) is mar by the chief, making deception via chicken blood impossible. On this ground, account on (false) hearsay from non-Samoan sources.^[23]

The argument hinged on the place of the *taupou* system in Samoan society. institutionalized virginity for young women of high rank, and it is exclusive to Samoan women emulated the *taupou* system, and Mead's informants denied and claimed that they had lied to Mead.^[24]

Anthropological reception and reactions

After an initial flurry of discussion, many anthropologists concluded that Fre views on the relationship between nature and nurture, as well as the data on colleague Robin Fox, Freeman "seemed to have a special place in hell reserve at that time".^[25]

Moreover, many field and comparative studies by anthropologists have since the same way in all societies. Systematic cross-cultural study of adolescence that adolescents experience harmonious relations with their families in most They find that, when family members need each other throughout their lives, rebelliousness, is minimal and counterproductive. Adolescents are likely to b practicing neolocal residence patterns (in which young adults must move the residence patterns result from young adults living in [industrial societies](#) who geographically mobile populations. Thus, Mead's analysis of adolescent conf societies worldwide.^[27]

First, these critics have speculated that he waited until Mead died before pu to respond. However, in 1978, Freeman sent a revised manuscript to Mead, b without responding.

Second, Freeman's critics point out that, by the time he arrived on the scene grandmothers, and had converted to [Christianity](#), so their testimony to him that Samoan culture had changed considerably in the decades following Mead's activity, many Samoans had come to adopt the same sexual standards as the Mead's book. They suggested that such women, in this new context, were unbecomingly behavior. Further, they suggested that these women might not be as forthcoming speaking to an elderly man as they would have been speaking to a woman neighbor concerned were already Christians at the time of their interviews as teenagers.

Some anthropologists criticized Freeman on methodological and empirical grounds. Freeman had conflated publicly articulated ideals with behavioral norms—that is, he told the public that it is ideal to remain a virgin, in practice they engaged in high levels of premarital sex. Freeman's own data documented the existence of premarital sex in a western Samoan village, he documented that 20% of 15-year-olds, 30% of 16-year-olds were engaged in premarital sex.^[30] In 1983, the [American Anthropological Association](#) published a book, to which they did not invite him. Their criticism was made formal at the meeting of the Anthropological Association the next month in Chicago, where a special session was held to discuss his book.^[31] They passed a motion declaring Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa* "irresponsible and misleading". Freeman commented that "to seek to dispose of Mead's work is a striking demonstration of the way in which belief can come to dominate the scientific process." In the years that followed, anthropologists vigorously debated these issues. Critics include Appell, who stated "I found Freeman's argument to be completely correct in little but tends to reinforce what many anthropologists already suspected" and others like Feinberg, Leacock, Levy, Marshall, Nardi, Patience, Paxman, Scheper-Hughes, and others. Much like Mead's work, Freeman's account has been challenged as being ideologically biased from a functionalist viewpoint ([sociobiology](#) and [interactionism](#)), as well as assigning Mead a high

refutation of Samoan sexual mores has been challenged, in turn, as being based on virginity, and *taupou* rather than on actual sexual practices within Samoan society. Lowell Holmes – who completed a lesser-publicized restudy – commented that he could therefore establish rapport with, adolescents and young adults on issues of (sexual behavior of wife and child) or Freeman, ten years my senior."^[36]

In 1996, Martin Orans examined Mead's notes preserved at the [Library of Congress](#) and made available to the general public. Orans concludes that Freeman's basic premise that the virgin Fa'apua'a Fa'amu (who later swore to Freeman that she had played a joke on Mead) was well aware of the forms and frequency of Samoan joking; second, that the restrictions on ceremonial virgins that corresponds to Fa'apua'a Fa'amu's account make clear that she had reached her conclusions about Samoan sexuality before Freeman. Orans concludes, contrary to Freeman, that Mead was never the victim of a hoax. Orans reaches different conclusions, and that Mead's conclusions hinge on an interpretive approach to Samoan culture. Orans concludes that due to Mead's interpretive approach – common to anthropologists of her hypotheses and conclusions are essentially unfalsifiable and therefore "r

In 1999, Freeman published the book *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* which included new material, in particular interviews that Freeman called of "exceptional fundamental importance" of one of Mead's then adolescent informants by a Samoan (in 1988 and 1993) and of her daughter (in 1995).^[38] Correspondence between Margaret Mead was also newly available to Freeman. He concludes in the introduction that the revelations about sexual behavior were in some cases merely the extrapolation of the greatest consequence were the results of a prankish hoax".

Freeman argues that Mead collected other evidence that contradicts her own conclusions that the sexual behavior of puberty girls were always escorted by female family members.^[39] He also notes that during her ethnological trips to Fitiuta, only eight weeks remained for her primary research, which he found "practically impossible" to find time with the sixty-six girls she was to study, |

With the remaining time, she instead went to Ofu, and the bulk of her research was done with her female companions, Fa'apua'a and Fofoa. Freeman claims Mead's letters to E. S. Shrewsbury about her research on homosexuality from [Marquesas Islands](#), and that she was seeking to confirm the same in Samoa. ^[41] She sent her conclusions to Boas on March 14 ^[42] and with "little left to say".

In Freeman's estimation: "no systematic, firsthand investigation of the sexual behavior of Samoan adolescents ever to be undertaken. Instead, Margaret Mead's account of adolescent sex behavior in Samoa elsewhere was based on what she had been told by Fa'apua'a and Fofoa, supported by her own observations previously made." ^[45] As Fa'apua'a told Freeman, in the 1980s, that she and her friends had given their testimony in the introduction of his second book about Mead: both that the culture was as she described it, and that she swore on the Bible, as a Christian, that it was true ^[46]

In 2009, a detailed review of the controversy by Paul Shankman was published, which largely supports the contention that Mead's research was essentially correct, and that Freeman had distorted and misrepresented both Mead and Samoan culture. ^{[3][4][5]}

See also

- [Culture of Samoa](#)
- *Heretic*, a play by Australian playwright [David Williamson](#) that explores Freeman's theory
- *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*

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