A Controversy on Samoa Comes of Age

A book claiming that Margaret Mead was "duped" by adolescent tales of free love strikes at the heart of cultural anthropology

Derek Freeman, an anthropologist at the University of Australia, set off some academic fireworks in February with a devastating critique of Margaret Mead's research on Samoa. It is too early to guess what the consequences will be, but his exposé may bring demands for more rigorous methods of collecting and checking reports from the field.

The explosion burst on the front page of the *New York Times* in the form of a description of Freeman's book, due to be published by Harvard University Press in the spring. The book, it said, challenged the accuracy of Mead's work and could "intensify the often bitterly contested nature versus nurture controversy."

Freeman sharply criticizes the founders of American cultural anthropology—Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Mead—and gives support to the opposing "biological" view which holds that hereditary factors are at least as important as culture in shaping human behavior. Anthropologists who spoke with *Science* said that this two-dimensional view of the division in their ranks is oversimplified. Nevertheless, Freeman himself says American anthropology tends to ignore evolutionary biology, and for this fault deserves to be shaken to its foundations. He would like his book to do just that.

The initial report spawned many other articles. Harvard was besieged with requests for page proofs. Polemicists reached for their pens. And at least one anthropologist cited favorably by Freeman, Lowell Holmes of Wichita State University, says he is talking with a publisher about a book of rebuttal.

Holmes knew Mead, spent several years living in Samoa restudying her work, and wrote an unpublished thesis 20 years ago faulting her for many of the errors that Freeman cites. However, Holmes regards this new book as "more a sociopolitical statement than anthropology." He says, "It reminds me of right-wing pamphlets I sometimes get in the mail." His comment may be a glimmer of the debate to come, if it follows the pattern of earlier ones on sociobiology. Indeed, the controversy may be fueled by another Harvard Press book to be published this spring: *Promethean Fire* by E. O. Wilson and Charles Lumsden, leading proponents of sociobiology. They give a popular defense of their view that human behavior cannot be understood unless one looks into the genetic and evolutionary history of the people one is studying. Wilson and other sociobiologists, when asked, immediately identify Freeman's book as a friendly treatise. Thus Freeman has earned his instant notoriety on two counts: for debunking a prominent figure and rekindling the sociobiology furor.

Freeman has written a literate and persuasive demolition of Mead's first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, according to his peers. Mead published this book in 1928 at the age of 26. It became an immediate best seller and a classic. For anthropology, it made a special argument for believing in the flexibility of human nature. But for millions of readers it was just a fascinating story about an idyllic, tolerant way of life on a tropical island. Mead's public career in some ways bore out the theme of this book.

By the time of her death in 1978, Mead had become a powerful voice for tolerance, particularly for trying to understand unfamiliar people and foreign customs. In this role she was formidable.

Wide World

American guru

Mead as a celebrity

"Almost single handedly," one anthropologist says, "she persuaded Congress that anthropology was something the taxpayer should support, and in this way secured the livelihood of many of her colleagues." Another says, "For the American public, she was anthropology."

Mead was a figure in the women's movement as well, an especially impressive one because she had risen in a discipline that was almost exclusively male. Her gender created special obstacles for her, some of which persist. For example, Freeman writes that Mead may have misunderstood Samoan life partly because she was not admitted to the all-male village council meetings.

Later, in the 1960's and 1970's, Mead became a guru for members of the postwar baby boom. She even dressed the part late in her life, wearing a black cloak and carrying a forked staff. She wrote about the "generation gap" in her regular column in *Redbook*; she appeared on the Johnny Carson show; she testified often before Congress; she served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; and, as Holmes says, "She was busy virtually every night of the year, writing, teaching, and giving talks." Mead was an important figure in the popular intellectual life of 20th-century America. Any cogent attack on her credibility is news.

What is the quality of Freeman's evidence against Mead? "Massive," says Ernst Mayr, professor of zoology at Harvard and a distinguished analyst of Darwinian theory. He read Freeman's manuscript and urged Harvard to publish it. Princeton and Yale were also after the book. Perhaps one of the most critical reviewers is Bradd Shore, an anthropologist at Emory who last year published the results of his own fieldwork in Samoa. He says, "Freeman has a justly deserved reputation for being a meticulous scholar. I'm sure there aren't any mistakes in the facts." John Whiting, a distinguished Harvard anthropologist, says, "Freeman did a good job, but he clearly had the ax out for Margaret."

The only adamant skeptic is Holmes, who says, "Freeman includes all of my criticisms of Mead, but doesn't mention

that I think her basic thesis is right: Samoa is an easier-going culture than ours." Holmes' case is particularly interesting because he was the first to make a thorough restudy of Mead's work, spending several years in Samoa. He sent the results to her, pointing out what seemed to be mistakes in her observations. She made comments and he made corrections. His original doctoral thesis was not published. Later, Holmes says, "I came to grips with her. When my book came out she wrote the most rotten review you have ever seen in your life."

In 1970, anthropologist Raoul Naroll of New York State University at Buffalo asked Holmes to contribute a chapter to a handbook on methodology he was preparing. He wanted a chapter on Mead's mistakes in Samoa. Naroll remembers: "Holmes wouldn't do it. He was afraid to criticize her. He thought he would lose grants. That doesn't mean he would have, but he thought he would." Holmes says he declined because he didn't have time to write the chapter. Today he still agrees with Mead's basic observations about Samoa.

The core of Freeman's argument is that Mead was ill prepared to do fieldwork when she decided to go to Samoa at the age of 23. She had just changed disciplines, leaving psychology to study under Franz Boas, Columbia's eminent professor of anthropology. Because she was inexperienced and ill trained, Freeman writes, what she saw in Samoa was not the real society that existed there, but a fictional one, elements of which were fixed in her imagination before she left New York.

As a consequence, Freeman believes, American anthropology has inherited a mistaken view of Samoa and, with it, the bias of Mead and her teachers—that human behavior can be analyzed sensibly without reference to human biology.

The most important bias Mead brought with her to Samoa, in Freeman's view, was her wish to find a "negative instance" that would disprove the concept that human nature follows universal patterns. This would bolster the anti-biological outlook of her professor, Franz Boas, a life-long opponent of the eugenics movement. He felt it was his duty, according to Freeman, to resist an overemphasis on genetics in anthropology.

In the early 1920's, Freeman writes, Boas gave his students a new idea: someone should study adolescence to see whether any cultures produced behavior very different from the Western norm, which was a pattern of rebellion and turmoil. The research would involve sifting the biological from the cultural influences, a complex undertaking.

Michael Jensen, *TIME*

Derek Freeman

He spent more than a decade building his case against Mead, he says, to provoke "a basic rethinking of our assumptions" in anthropology.

This was the task that Mead accepted, "an impossibly difficult problem to foist upon a graduate student as sparsely experienced" as she, Freeman writes. He points out that she was not fluent in Samoan; she spent only 9 months in the country; she lived with an American family the whole time; and village life was badly disrupted by a hurricane while she was there.

Freeman concludes that Mead, overwhelmed, opted for the simple way out and provided Boas with the observations that she thought would best fit his thesis. She reported that Samoan adolescence was very different from ours—sexually lax, unconstrained, and "the age of greatest ease." Mead found not only that adolescence was carefree, but that the entire Samoan ethos was casual. "Samoa," she wrote, "is a place where no one plays for very high stakes, no one pays very heavy prices, no one suffers for his convictions, or fights to the death for special ends." Boas accepted the report uncritically and added his own preface to the book.

Freeman rebuts this portrait of Samoa with historical data and recent observations of his own in nine categories. It is enough to consider two: aggression and sexual mores. Mead wrote that the Samoans are "one of the most amiable, least contentious and most peaceful peoples in the world." She also claimed that they "never hate enough to want to kill anybody." Freeman cites accounts given by visitors to Samoa beginning in 1787 and running through the police records of 1966. There were consistent reports of fights, affrays between villages, and murders. He calculates that the per capita rate of assault in Western Samoa during the mid-1960's was five times higher than that of the United States.

Mead's description of Samoan sexual customs was perhaps the most celebrated part of her book, certainly one that helped sales. The Samoans, she wrote, have the "sunniest and easiest attitudes towards sex," tolerating a period of free lovemaking among adolescents before marriage. "Marriages make no violent claim for fidelity," she wrote, and "jealousy, as a widespread social phenomenon, is very rare." Freeman says that on this, the most critical subject in her study, Mead got the picture exactly reversed. According to him, Samoa "is a society predicated on rank, in which female virgins are both highly valued and eagerly sought after."

This statement is supported by many accounts of brothers beating their sisters and the sisters' boyfriends if they are caught together after dark. It is "customary in Samoa, as Mead quite failed to report, for the virginity of an adolescent daughter, of whatever rank, to be safeguarded by her brothers," Freeman writes.

He also describes the cult of virginity—the taupou system—as "central to the sexual mores of the Samoans" and "one of the principal characteristics of the cultures of Western as against Eastern Polynesia." This was the traditional practice of selecting girls to serve as taupou, or official virgins, an emblem of pride for the village they lived in. Taupou were married with great ceremony, but before consummation, they were made to undergo a public trial of their virginity. (The trial disappeared as Christianity advanced in Samoa.) A taupou took great risks if she compromised her status, for angry villagers and relatives in some cases were said to have beaten taupou to death upon failure to pass the test of virginity.

Mead's explanation for these stories was that the taupou took on the "onus of virginity" for the whole adolescent female population, leaving the throng to be promiscuous. Freeman says just the opposite, that although taupou were of noble rank, every family aspired to follow the noble ideal.

Mead also wrote that a taupou could avoid embarrassment in her premarriage test simply by asking the officiating chief not to embarrass her. But then, the accounts of taupou being beaten seemed incongruous. Mead explained that this probably happened only when they failed to provide a little chicken blood for the ceremony or failed to warn the officials beforehand of their compromised status. Thus, the chiefs were caught unprepared, were themselves embarrassed, and became angry.

This interpretation, Freeman writes, is a "travesty," and he calls the stories of adolescent promiscuity "fible-fables." He believes Mead was simply "duped" by the adolescents she interviewed. Embarrassed by her questions about sex, they may have decided to tell her entertaining stories. This, at any rate, is what Freeman reports the Samoans now say. "These people are quite adept at pulling your leg," he says.

The cult of virginity made sexual relations difficult, not simple, Freeman concludes, and he closes his case with some data on rape. Many observers over the years have commented on the number of rapes in Samoa. Freeman cites this historical record and his own calculation that the incidence of forcible rape in Samoa in 1966 was twice that of the United States and 20 times that of England.

Even more common in Samoa is an unusual form of surreptitious rape, known as moetotolo or "sleep crawling," in which young men try to destroy the virginity of sleeping girls. If this is included, the incidence of rape, according to Freeman, rises to "one of the highest to be found anywhere in the world." This hardly bears out Mead's statement in 1938 that "the idea of forcible rape or of any sexual act to which both participants do not give themselves freely is completely foreign to the Samoan mind."

Despite its thoroughness, Freeman's book is unbalanced in a way. At the age of 66 and at the apex of his career, he is attacking the first work of a graduate student in anthropology, a pioneering study written almost 60 years ago. Why did Freeman wait until now to make this case? Freeman explains that he, Holmes, and others did point out some of Mead's errors in the 1950's and 1960's. She responded with a monograph in 1969 that partly defended *Coming of Age in Samoa* and partly conceded its shortcomings. To the extent that she missed seeing the harsh side of Samoan life, Mead wrote, her failure may have been due to "a special variation on the Samoan pattern" in her village in 1925, "a temporary felicitous relaxation of the quarrels and rivalries. . . ." On the other hand, she conceded, the fact that most of her informants were adolescent girls may have skewed her insight.

Freeman says, "This was a very difficult condition that Mead laid down for me in the 'temporary felicitous relaxation.' " He claims he could not locate evidence to refute it until October 1981, when he found in the archives of the high court of American Samoa and in the journal of an ethnographer who visited Mead's village in January 1926 proof that the quarreling did not stop during her visit. He thinks he has eliminated all but one explanation for Mead's mistakes: she accepted some adolescent fantasies as fact.

Holmes, who broke off correspondence with Freeman in 1967 because of the offensive way he was investigating Mead's personal life in Samoa, still defends Mead's interpretation. While Samoans are sometimes violent, Holmes says, "I never heard of any rape. I never saw a fistfight in 4 years living there. Moetotolo never occurred in any village I was in, as far as I heard." Holmes cites an article he published in 1978 summarizing years of psychometric testing on the Samoans. "Again and again, on all different varieties of tests, the people come out as gentle, cooperative, low-key, and submissive." He is puzzled by the attention Freeman is getting. "There must be a hate-Mead club in America."

The Bettman Archive

In Samoa

Mead in the field

Shore also defends Mead's idea that the taupou takes on the burden of virginity as a way of permitting promiscuity for others. "The Samoans have a way of recognizing the public face of something and masking a gap between what we would call reality and their ideal. Their ideal seems just as real to them as our material real." But Shore agrees that the Samoans are known to students of the Pacific islands as being "aggressive or touchy" and that "there is a lot of rape in Samoa." But on the whole, he finds Freeman's portrait too dark. "It reminds me of moments in Samoa, as Mead does."

Freeman's response to this criticism is scathing, particularly as regards Holmes, whom he dismisses as being "seriously compromised" by his failure to tell the world of Mead's mistakes. He says he has evidence that Holmes felt pressured not to criticize her. "That's called a conspiracy," he adds. As for Shore, he says, "I'll bet he doesn't even know what a hippocampus is."

Shore's reaction to Freeman's book is "absurd," according to Freeman, because "he doesn't understand what it is about. It's not my view of Samoa at all; it is a formal refutation of the utterances of Margaret Mead."

Of course, Freeman is aiming to do more than simply refute Mead's portrait of Samoa. Throughout the text, he hints at ways in which Samoan behavior might be taken to illustrate biological mechanisms at work. In his final chapter, he makes a plea for "giving full cognizance to biology, as well as to culture" in order to prevent anthropology from becoming "isolated in a conceptual cul de sac." He believes that "anthropology in America is a schizophrenic system: you have cultural anthropologists and physical anthropologists, and they have nothing to do with one another." What is needed, he says, is more attention to human biology, cooperation between the disciplines, and far more sophisticated methods for analyzing the data. "This means a basic rethinking of our assumptions."

Some critics say Freeman might have written a more useful book if he had made it an example of what he wants, an analysis of Samoan society according to this new technique. That would have been difficult, and Freeman says he has done this already on a limited scale in professional articles. Freeman believes the first item on the agenda now is to clear the stage of relics from the 1920's,

including the "Boasian prejudice" against biology.

The controversy over Mead's Samoan research is likely to give weight to those who have argued in favor of a more rigorous system for data checking. One of these is anthropologist William Irons of Northwestern University, who calls himself a sociobiologist. He has always opposed the "gentleman's understanding" in his field, the notion that one should not study a culture already being studied by a peer. (Because of this tradition, he was told he could not study the Bakhtiari in Iran: they had already been claimed by someone else. He studied Turkmen instead.)

"Anthropology has been terribly remiss" in this respect, Irons says. The result is that the field tends to be highly theoretical, full of interesting facts, but unable to produce general statements. Irons himself welcomes restudies of his work, for he says it makes the conclusions that much stronger when confirmed. "There is a change going on. People are becoming convinced that it is valuable to make a general theory, and that we have to be able to check data."—ELIOT MARSHALL

German Voters Get a Technological Choice

The Christian Democrats are touting a high-technology future, while the Social Democrats are looking for votes from environmentalists

Bonn. The West German election campaign, which will end when voters go to the polls on 6 March, has been dominated by arguments about the economic policies of the current coalition government, headed by Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic party, and its support for President Reagan's military and disarmament policies. More fundamentally at stake, however, is the direction that the country's technological future should take after three decades of rapid postwar growth.

The Christian Democrats are eagerly pushing policies aimed at promoting a new burst of high-technology-based growth that, ironically, bear many resemblances to those currently being pursued by France's 18-month-old socialist government. In contrast, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which lost power last October when its coalition was deserted by the liberal Free Democrat party, has been rapidly absorbing many of the ideas of the proenvironment, antinuclear movement, the Greens (*die Grüne*). The result is a platform stressing environmental controls, renewable energy research and a moratorium on fast breeder reactors that is remarkably similar to the formula put together by presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Nowhere is the contrast more starkly evident than in the background and views of the two principal parties' spokesmen on research and technology. The Christian Democrat vision of the future is personified in its relatively youthful, energetic—and politically ambitious—new minister for energy and research, Heinz Riesenhuber, a professional chemist who ran a chemical engineering company before entering the German Parliament in 1976, where he rapidly became its energy spokesman and a strong supporter of nuclear energy.

Heinz Riesenhuber

Promotes Reagan-style science policy

In sharp contrast, the Social Democrats have appointed as their chief advisor on the same issues Klaus Meyer-Abich, a theoretical physicist turned philosopher who is currently director of a project on environment, society and energy at the University of Essen. Meyer-Abich was one of the individuals responsible for reversing the SPD's previous support for completion of the prototype fast breeder reactor at Kalkar (see *Science*, 10 December 1982, p. 1094). He admits that he is "a symbol of the opening up of the party" to ideas expressed by the Greens and other parts of what he describes as "the new social movements" that have emerged in Germany over the past decade, but suggests that only the SPD has the political experience to put the goals of such groups into practice.

The Greens did surprisingly well in local elections in Hamburg and Hessen last fall and there has been speculation that they could drain sufficient supporters from the leading parties in the national election to hold a balance of power, a prospect that neither major party relishes. Since the SPD has begun to embrace some of their policies, however, support for the Greens has ebbed a little.

Riesenhuber has, as even his opponents admit, been one of the more successful of Kohl's ministers. A recent newspaper article named him as one of three ministers for whom a job would be assured in a new Christian Democrat government, and scientists are relieved to find themselves talking to a professional colleague after experiencing a string of lawyers in the post. "He has a feeling for the problems and procedures of science" says one official of the Max-Planck Gesellschaft in Munich.

The government's priorities for science are reflected in the 1983 research budget for the Ministry of Research and Technology approved by the Bundestag, the German Parliament, just before Christmas. An increase of 5.2 percent over the SPD's 1982 budget—slightly higher than the anticipated inflation rate—includes a boost for basic research in physics and chemistry, for electronics, biotechnology, and nuclear energy, with decreases for research into energy conservation and the "quality of life."

Apart from the nuclear energy and conservation funds, however, most of these budget changes were already in the pipeline. More significant are Riesenhuber's attempts to bring the spirit of