

The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy

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Shankman's masterful account of anthropologist Derek Freeman's "trashing of Margaret Mead" amounts to everything you really want in a history of an alleged scientific controversy: it is scholarly, readable, interdisciplinary, thorough, and juicy. Shankman, a professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, proves in this work what I always tell students in my graduate history of medicine course: you don't need to be trained as an historian to do good history; you just have to be devoted to evidence and know that time goes forward.

Fortunately, Shankman knows that the most readable histories rarely simply go forward. He begins his book by recounting how the "controversy" over Margaret Mead exploded onto the international media scene in 1983, several years after Mead's death, when Harvard University Press provided journalistic outlets pre-publication copies of Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. This approach pretty much guaranteed that no anthropologists or historians would be ready to challenge Freeman's account of Mead and her work, since they had not had the benefit of seeing Freeman's book. To answer reporters' questions required potential critics of Freeman to trust the reporters' representations of Freeman's representations—and required them to enter into a "controversy" in sound bites—so many declined, enabling Freeman's book to grow long legs by virtue of a skewed environment rather than natural worthiness.

In his 1983 book and subsequent publications, Freeman built up a story about Mead that specifically challenged her portrayal of Samoan adolescence in her popular 1928 book,

Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization. As the subtitle of *Coming of Age* implied, Mead had intended her popularization to function as a sort of social tool in her own culture. To quote Shankman, "In writing about the contrast between adolescence in Samoa and the United States, Mead became a social critic, not simply an ethnographic reporter" (p. 103). Shankman beautifully explains *Coming of Age* through a careful account of Mead's own biography as well as the sexual politics of 1920s America. In today's terms, Mead was a sex positive individual in both her work and her personal life. She enjoyed the romantic and sexual company of both women and men, no matter to whom she was married. She tried to use *Coming of Age* to suggest that the struggles of female adolescence might substantially lessen were girls able—as she claimed they generally were in Samoa—to dally with sex. Shankman sums it up thus: "While Samoa was not her own life writ large, as Freeman believed, the book [Mead's *Coming of Age*] was a manifesto of Mead's views about America in the 1920s" (p. 105). A book like this made sense in Mead's self-image: "Like Boas, Sapir, and Benedict, Mead saw herself as a citizen-scientist. Not content with being a bookish academic, she wanted to be a public intellectual and activist, using ethnographic data to address important public issues" (p. 108).

For his part, Freeman wanted to be the man who brought Margaret Mead down. As he continued his campaign against her reputation, Freeman increasingly portrayed himself grandiosely as the co-star in the drama he had created, entitling the 1996 edition of his book *Margaret Mead and the Heretic*. Freeman claimed to be personally responsible for undoing what he termed "the Mead paradigm," "a paradigm that he believed had held American anthropology back for more than half a century and had misled the whole world. The 'Mead paradigm' was allegedly antibiological, antievolutionary, antiscientific, and culturally deterministic. Freeman was committed to first sounding the

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alarm and then putting an end to what he saw as an intellectual disaster” (p. 10).

Never mind that he had Mead wrong—and knew it. In a lovely bit of historical detective work, Shankman uses what Freeman himself left behind to show that Freeman knew perfectly well Mead’s work on Samoa was not nearly so thin nor so naive—and certainly not anti-evolutionary nor anti-biological—as Freeman claimed. But to be the hero of “modern” science, Freeman needed Mead to be a dope. And so he reported and even fomented an elaborate fiction about how Mead had spun her tale of Samoan adolescence out of what she heard from only two informants on only one night, informants Mead supposedly never realized were just joshing her. By 1999, Freeman’s account had reached new heights: *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead*.

But it was Freeman who was hoaxing the world. Shankman conclusively shows Mead drew on substantially more data than Freeman lets on, that she was not a silly girl inclined to mistake sexual fish stories with cultural practices, and that her substantial scientific publications evidence that—while she was no major theoretician—she was a fine anthropologist, especially when considered in the context of the period. Concludes Shankman: “Freeman constructed a ‘just so’ story about Mead and a parallel story about himself” (p. 12).

There was, in fact, no “Mead paradigm” that anthropologists worshipped and against which Freeman could tilt. Mead was not an “absolute” cultural determinist; she recognized the importance of biology and evolution throughout her career. Freeman was able to advance his argument only by very selective use of information, including the creative use of partial quotations and the strategic omission of relevant data at crucial junctures in his argument. (p. 12)

Yes, in the service of her “citizenship” in what she hoped would become a sex positive world, Mead downplayed some of the uglier realities of Samoan life—violent rape, the implicit discouraging of the reporting of rape, the beating of those who violated overt sexual norms. But she was not hoaxed and she wasn’t just making stuff up.

Nevertheless, plenty of camps were happy to believe Freeman. According to Shankman, “American conservatives embraced Freeman as one of their own because they believed people like Mead were responsible for the moral decline of the country. Sociobiologists and later evolutionary psychologists found Freeman’s critique of Mead helpful in advancing their scientific agenda about human nature” (p. 18). And so Freeman found plenty of unwitting helpers in his “trashing” of Mead.

As an anthropologist who has himself worked in Samoa, Shankman is able to carefully consider what we can really know about Samoan attitudes towards sex. Freeman tried to claim that the traditional Samoan *taupou* system of ceremonial virgins negated Mead’s claims about a casual attitude

towards sex in Samoa. How could you so value virginity and also tolerate pre-marital sex among adolescents? But Shankman shows it’s more complicated than that: the *taupou* system had class-specific elements to it and had morphed with the introduction of Christianity, such that Freeman’s oversimplified equation—valuing virginity means you wouldn’t ever allow pre-marital sex—falls apart. Shankman summarizes his fine analysis of the literature this way:

Freeman not only misrepresented the historical work of others but neglected his own personal experiences in the islands during World War II and his unpublished work on the *taupou* system. To what extent these omissions were conscious and deliberate or unconscious and inadvertent is unclear. What is clear is that Freeman himself, not his sources, misrepresented and distorted the historical record so as to favor his interpretation of the *taupou* system and his critique of Mead. Mead’s interpretation of the decline of the *taupou* system, however brief, is more in accord with the historical record presented here. (p. 189)

It’s hard to say what is most satisfying in Shankman’s book: his seamless interweaving of solid history, anthropology, and cultural studies; the clarity of his presentation; his honesty with regard to his aim (“Ultimately, this book tries to extricate Mead’s reputation from the quicksand of controversy” [p. 19]); his ability to sort out objectivity and subjectivity; his explanation of how Samoans see these layered accounts of themselves; or his stories of his personal encounters with Mead and Freeman. I suspect, though, what many readers will find most stunning and even entertaining is the portrayal of Derek Freeman that emerges from this book. One has a hard time deciding which portion of the DSM best applies to the man who managed to permanently tarnish the reputation of one of the most important women scientists of the twentieth century. Even Phil Donohue, interviewing Freeman, could not resist commenting on the pathologies oozing out of “the heretic”: “Dr. Freeman, sir. Part of the problem that we have here is your own posture. You do cut a bit of the messianic personality as we speak” (p. 37). Mead had personally noted the same about Freeman years earlier (p. 57).

There is simply too much evidence for Freeman’s strangeness to write Shankman off as just doing Mead’s dirty work. Indeed, as Shankman lines up one event after another, Freeman comes across of enough as a nut that one could only conclude Shankman would have been shirking from his scholarly duties not to mention and explore this critical element of “the controversy.” Freeman repeatedly threatened critics—including Shankman—with the ruining of their careers. (“During one of the commercial breaks in the [1983 Donohue] show he leaned over and quietly informed [anthropologist Bradd] Shore that he would ruin his career. This was not an idle threat. Freeman contacted the University of Chicago and asked them to rescind Shore’s Ph.D. He also requested that Columbia University

Press withdraw Shore's ethnography on Samoa from its publications" [p. 38]). Freeman also harassed editors into letting him have space in their publications well beyond reason. Shankman relates that when he went to Freeman's university to give a talk, Freeman's behavior was nothing short of bizarre. At another talk, one faculty member blurted out, "We all know he's crazy, but we can't say it!" (p. 56).

This wasn't just your garden variety nutty professor. Shankman traces out Freeman's delusional collapse during a trip to Sarawak in 1961:

Freeman was convinced that the erotic statues not only were a perversion of authentic tribal culture but were also exerting a form of mind control over Freeman through their hypnotic power, a power that he was determined to break. Freeman also believed that the statues were being used by [a colleague] and the Soviet Union to subvert the local government itself. Indeed, Freeman thought [the colleague's wife] was a Soviet agent. (p. 54)

In 1964, when Mead met up with Freeman at the Australian National University where he worked, during a seminar, after she asked him why he hadn't delivered a text to her the night before, he accidentally blurted out to her, "Because I was afraid

you might ask me to spend the night" (p. 60). Shankman assumes Freeman didn't "literally imagine Mead as a seductress" (p. 60) but clearly "she had come to occupy a central place in Freeman's psychological universe" by 1964 (p. 61).

It is a shame that, as Shankman observes, "Although Mead's personality and motives were scrutinized by Freeman, both the media and professional anthropologists have been less interested and more reluctant to consider Freeman's motives and personality" (p. 19). As I've learned in my own studies of highly publicized scientific controversies (Dreger, 2008, 2011), a careful study of accusers' motives and personalities often explains much (Lawrence, 2008).

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