

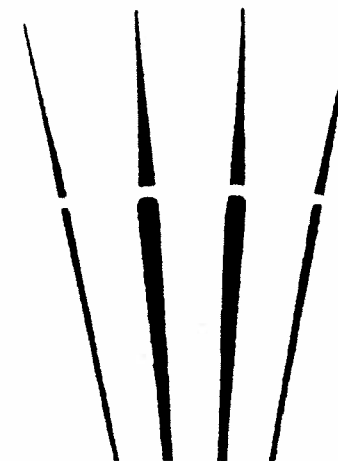
❖ STUDIES IN AMERICAN ❖
THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Series Editor

Paul S. Boyer

The Trashing of Margaret Mead

*Anatomy of
an Anthropological Controversy*



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THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

What the Controversy Meant to Samoans

BY THE 1920S THE SOUTH SEAS had become part of American consciousness. As Mead wrote *Coming of Age*, she thought about what the islands might mean to her American audience. But she did not anticipate what her book would mean to Samoans. She had written *Coming of Age* for Americans, and although she said that she wrote about Samoans from the perspective of the Samoan girls she had known, she did not write as a Samoan. Mead presented Samoans as potential models for minimizing the problems of American adolescence, shaping them to her message. From her perspective, she had portrayed them in a positive manner. Yet as Samoans heard about her book in subsequent decades or read it in English, many felt that Mead had misrepresented them. Her voice was not their voice. At stake were their identity and the world's perception of them.

When Freeman criticized Mead, he claimed to be speaking on behalf of Samoans and upholding their dignity. To him, Mead's book was a "travesty," not just a potential misunderstanding of another culture. Freeman was particularly adamant about the subject that Samoans themselves found most offensive in Mead's work—her description and interpretation of their private lives. Although most of *Coming of Age* was noncontroversial, with only a single chapter about sex framed within a broader discussion of marriage, this part of the book drew everyone's attention. Freeman believed that he was representing Samoan views in his critique of Mead and providing them with symbolic retribution for Mead's alleged transgression of their culture.

Some Samoans have vigorously objected to *Coming of Age* for decades. Anthropologist Leonard Mason remembered that, while using the book in his course at the University of Hawai'i in the late 1940s, a young Samoan student protested that, contrary to Mead, Samoans greatly valued female virginity.¹ The student, who became a Samoan chief and later governor of American

Samoa, remembered his protest almost four decades later, when he appeared in the documentary film *Margaret Mead and Samoa*.² In 1971, when Mead briefly stopped in American Samoa on her first visit there since the 1920s, a young Samoan woman challenged her presence on local television. Many other Samoans, including some Samoan academics, have been critical, believing that Mead disregarded the sanctity of virginity for Samoan women and neglected the institution of the ceremonial virgin, or *taupou*, that was at the center of Samoan public morality. One Samoan academic, Le Tagaloa Fa'anafi, felt that Mead had portrayed Samoans "like animals."³

Today, younger Samoans compare themselves to their American contemporaries and view their own sexual conduct as far more restricted. Many have visited America or have relatives there. They note that in America boys can openly ask girls to go out or vice versa; in Samoa relationships are usually secretive due to parental opposition. Younger Samoans view American parents as much easier on their adolescents than Samoan parents. As one young woman informed me, "In America, if you do something wrong, you get a lecture. In Samoa, you get a beating."

There is no doubt that Mead struck a raw nerve among Samoans with her discussion of sex in *Coming of Age*. Mead herself later acknowledged that if she had realized that Samoans would read the book, she would have written it differently. And she recognized that younger Samoans could be embarrassed by its contents.⁴ However, she wrote in the 1920s, when Samoans, while literate in their own language, were often not literate in English. And Mead chose not to revise and update the text itself but rather added new prefaces to new editions, explaining that the book should remain faithful to what she observed then.⁵ To Freeman, her failure to revise it demonstrated that Mead was unrepentant in her permissive view of Samoan sexual conduct.

For some Samoans, the problem with Mead was not only *what* she wrote about their private lives but *that* she wrote about them without their knowledge or approval. As we have seen, Mead's writing reflected the era in which she did her research and wrote her book. In the 1920s almost no one, including most Americans, knew what anthropology was. Studying other people was the anthropologist's prerogative; indigenous people were ethnographic subjects, not research collaborators. Furthermore, in the 1920s American Samoa was a colony. Samoans were American subjects, not American citizens. Research permissions were not required. There was no concern about informed consent; that is, the idea that the people being studied should know from the outset what the research involves and how it might harm or benefit them. So ethnographers of that era could engage in research without going through extensive Human Research Committee reviews, as they would today, where the appropriateness

of the research and the exact wording of each question in the interview protocol would be considered in detail prior to the research itself. They also would not need to obtain prior written consent from those being studied.

Writing, too, was the anthropologist's prerogative. Mead would write her report for the National Research Council, *Coming of Age* for an American lay audience, and *Social Organization of Manu'a* for a professional audience. Like other anthropologists of her era, Mead did not appreciate for many years that Samoans themselves would have concerns about their image and hence her findings. As Mead looked back on her writing about Samoa, she reminded readers: "Only during World War II did we begin to learn that anyone, anywhere in the world, might be listening. And from that time on the anthropologist had to assume a new responsibility to speak—and of course write—about every people in the world, however remote, in ways that they, their friends and their descendants would find bearable and intelligible."⁶

Can We Talk about It?

Mead was not the only anthropologist whose work has been called into question by the people in their books. Oscar Lewis, author of popular books such as *The Children of Sanchez* and *La Vida*, was among a number of anthropologists who have been criticized by their former subjects and collaborators.⁷ This is especially true when a work becomes well known. So who can speak for indigenous people? Can an anthropologist be trusted to do so? And for which groups or individuals can he or she speak? Finally, to what extent can indigenous people express themselves in their own cultures, where some voices are favored while others are suppressed?

This is clearly a challenging set of issues. In the South Pacific today there are Western anthropologists who collaborate with their indigenous counterparts and vice versa. As a matter of practical necessity, both indigenous and Western scholars rely on the work of earlier anthropologists, historians, and other Westerners because there are no other written records. Nevertheless, the authority of Western scholars is no longer unquestioned. As Vilsoni Hereniko, a Polynesian scholar from Rotuma, put it: "Knowledgeable as they are, outsiders can never truly know what it is like to be a Samoan. . . . As [Samoan author Albert] Wendt had written: 'They [outsiders] must not pretend they can write from inside us.' . . . This is good advice, because history has shown that neither Margaret Mead nor Derek Freeman really knew how 'natives' think."⁸

Although Western anthropologists may not be able to become insiders, they nevertheless have tried to represent insiders along a number of dimensions that Samoans themselves consider important, including higher/lower political

rank, male/female, and older/younger. Thus, older, higher-ranking males articulate a public ideology that is often but not always held by others. Younger, lower-ranking men and women are subject to public ideology but may not fully share it. Their views may be less public and less well known. The status of the ethnographer also plays a role. It is not surprising that female ethnographers like Penelope Schoeffel, Bonnie Nardi, Sharon Tiffany, and Annette Weiner have been more interested in Samoan women than male anthropologists and that some of them have been more sympathetic to Mead than to Freeman, who, as the holder of a princely title, saw Samoa from a different perspective.⁹

In the 1990s a generation of young Samoan scholars at the University of Hawai'i and at universities in New Zealand actively initiated research on young Samoans themselves. Bridging the gap between insiders and outsiders, these scholars found that in overseas settings, where individuality could be expressed in a neutral context and in confidence, younger Samoans were more willing to discuss what has previously been taboo. For young Samoan women, this meant discussing subjects that had been secret and shameful.

Samoan researcher AnneMarie Tupuola, who received her Ph.D. in education from Victoria University, found that while initially reluctant, young Samoan women were able to discuss their personal experiences for the first time. As one participant in her study related:

This research helped me a lot. It gave me an inspiration of strength and inner peace. I felt very safe talking about my sexual experiences . . . even though it was hard I felt I could trust the other [Samoan] women and the researcher; it made a big difference—we had common ground and that helped. I feel this research is so important. It is not very often that young Samoan girls get the opportunity to talk about their experiences. In the past, this has always been by our Samoan elders, the palagi [European] intellectuals or those who are so far removed from our realities.¹⁰

In Samoa young women's conversations were largely confined to the very limited sphere of other young women. They could not speak publicly about their private lives. In fact, as noted earlier, the idea of privacy in traditional Samoan culture has negative associations. Given that Mead was a young American woman talking about Samoan female adolescents and about their private lives, Samoan disapproval of her work is understandable.

Samoans have expressed their resentment about *Coming of Age* in a variety of ways. In 1969–70, when I was doing research in the islands on Samoan migration overseas, some Samoans spoke with me about *Coming of Age*, knowing that I was interested in their culture. Although my research was not about sex, I was told by one government official to refrain from writing about Samoans as Mead had. I was also told that if Mead wanted to visit Western Samoa, she

would not be allowed to do so. Moreover, another government employee informed me that because of its objectionable content, *Coming of Age* was not available in the public library in Apia. These Samoans felt strongly about Mead. Yet how did they know about the book if it was not available somewhere in the islands? I visited the library, and the book was there after all.¹¹

Although some Samoans had read the book or parts of it in Samoa or abroad, most had not, just as most Americans had not. Samoans nevertheless had heard about it from other islanders or Europeans or from Samoan newspapers after the controversy erupted in 1983. There was a good deal of misinformation. For example, I was told by university-educated Samoans that Mead had done her research in Western Samoa, yet she never visited this part of the Samoan archipelago. I was informed that she did her research in the 1940s and that she only spent a few weeks in the islands, although she actually spent over eight months in American Samoa in 1925–26. And I was told that Mead studied only very young girls, not adolescents, although she had focused on adolescents. The precise details varied, but Samoans' general resentment of Mead was apparent.

Mead was especially disliked because she had openly and publicly discussed sex, representing Samoan women as sexually permissive. Ethnobotanist Paul Cox reported that in the late 1970s, well before Freeman published his critique, Samoans on Manu'a were reluctant to talk about Mead, and among those who would talk she was not held in high regard. Puzzled by Samoans' dislike for Mead, Cox asked a young Samoan with a master's degree in sociology about people's perception of her:

"So what's the deal with Margaret Mead? . . . None of the chiefs or older women seem willing to say much about her."

"Oh, her," he said. "The old people are really angry at Mead."

"Why? I thought they liked her."

"That was before they knew what she wrote about them," he said.

"Mead argued that Samoans have an easier time passing through adolescence than palagi [European] teenagers do," I offered.

"Maybe they do, maybe they don't," he said. "But it blew the old people's minds when one of the village kids came back from college several years ago and translated a few excerpts from her book for them."

"You mean that for all these years the villagers didn't know what she had written about them?" I asked.

"No. They all assumed it was very complimentary. But when they heard that she claimed that they were having sex with nearly everybody in sight, they burned her book."

"Why do you think Mead wrote those things? You don't think that she just made them up, do you?" I asked.

"Samoans joke about anything, particularly with foreigners. Somebody just fed her a bunch of baloney and she believed it."¹²

Context Matters

Like other visitors to the islands, Cox found that discussing sexual topics and participating in sexual activities were governed by Samoan—rather than American—conceptions of etiquette and sexuality. Privately, Samoans were interested in sex and knowledgeable about it, but public discussion, apart from joking and bantering, was another matter. The same was true for sex education. Although Samoan children grew up learning about their bodies and sometimes secretly witnessing sex, there was no formal sex education by parents. And Christian churches were quite restrictive.

In the islands, sexual conversations that were permissible in some contexts were strictly forbidden in others. Samoans distinguished between public behavior that was culturally appropriate and private behavior that violated cultural ideals; such private behavior could not and should not be discussed publicly.¹³ Anthropologist Robert Maxwell discovered this code of etiquette when he attempted to carry out research on Samoan sexual attitudes in the 1960s. As he did his fieldwork, Maxwell realized just how difficult it was to gather accurate accounts of sexual behavior because discussion was so dependent on context:

First, the range of subjects covered in conversation with a chief is necessarily limited. One does not casually visit a chief in his home and inquire about his attitude toward masturbation, for example. It would be an outrageous breach of etiquette. Second, the untitled men may talk about sex under intimate circumstances, such as all-male parties, but it is difficult to guide this sort of banter into productive channels. Furthermore, the sexual experience disclosed by the speaker has to be carefully edited beforehand, particularly if the girls involved in the story have brothers present at the gathering, for even speaking about flirting with someone's sister can provoke an argument. Finally, it was in conversation about sex that the reciprocal lie [where everyone involved is bending the truth] seemed to acquire epic qualities. The relative utility of entertainment and truth were so disproportionate that it was safest to believe nothing that was said in these contexts. I regularly listened to tales of personal conquests, superhuman masculine endurance, and incredible female responsiveness that were later revealed to be entirely untrue.¹⁴

Context was also important in cross-sex joking; as writer Joseph Theroux noted:

Sex jokes, for example, wildly obscene, are perfectly acceptable as long as no females present are related to anyone in the group and no female relatives are referred to. The sainted pastor's wife, a pillar of the community, will leer and mutter a *double entendre* with the abandonment of a sailor as long as the audience is appropriate. Makelita's [Margaret Mead's] book, people thought, found a wider, and therefore inappropriate audience.

Walking along the beach at Luma, the village where Makelita stayed, I came across a white-haired old woman, weeding her garden. I asked if she could tell me the site of the first dispensary. She rose and said she would take me there. We chatted as we walked along the beach and came upon another old woman, laying out clothes to dry on rocks. "Where are you taking that young *palagi* [European] man?" she asked.

Without hesitation, my guide replied, "We're going to the plantation to be alone."

"What will you do there?"

"He wants to plant some *ta'amu*" (a large, long root plant, similar to the taro).

"Oh, no, you're too old for the game!"

"And you're so jealous!"

By this time both crones were cackling. It was perfectly acceptable behavior, these two women in their innocent fun. They cackled louder when I put my arm around my guide. But they would be shocked to find that I would publish the story, thereby sharing it with a wider audience, many of whom they would not have joked with.¹⁵

Anthropologist Tim O'Meara also participated in a sexual joking situation with a group of women as he and a friend from New Zealand were gathering limpets from the shoreline:

As we carefully wrapped our harvest, the women entertained themselves with ribald jokes, using Pascal and me as butts. In the proper company, Samoans find these suggestive comments hysterically funny precisely because they are so outrageous and so improbable. If there was any possibility of following up on the suggestions, they would be highly embarrassing rather than funny. The jokes elicited peals of laughter from the women—the cruder the reference, the wilder the laughter—but only uncomfortable smiles from Pascal and me. We had learned, however, that in this situation the *only* defense is a good offense, and the more offensive the better. Finally giving in to the crudity of the occasion, our own quick and vulgar replies sent the women rolling hysterically on the ground.¹⁶

Samoans also "see" sex differently than Americans. In the 1980s, when videos and videocassette recorders first arrived in Western Samoa, families

would rent R-rated videos with abundant sex and violence. They would watch them with their young children present. When I asked parents whether it was a good idea for children to watch this kind of material, they assured me that it was perfectly acceptable; children could watch sex scenes because they knew that Samoans would never engage in such activities themselves; only Europeans would behave in such a degrading manner.

Samoans have become much more self-conscious about sex as a result of Western contact and missionization over the past 170 years. Samoan cultural traditions involving sex, such as erotic singing and erotic dancing, have diminished. At one time the islands had rich traditions in these activities. However, with the advent of Christian missionaries in the 1830s, they have been gradually suppressed.¹⁷ Samoans now sometimes speak of the premissionary era as a “time of darkness,” and they are embarrassed or ashamed about this part of their past, which they now regard as sinful.

Eleanor Gerber, an anthropologist who did fieldwork in American Samoa in the 1970s, discussed the contemporary reworking of history in her evaluation of Samoan responses to Mead’s *Coming of Age*: “So strong is this reconstruction of the past that educated Samoans who have read *Coming of Age* automatically reject what they euphemistically call ‘all that sex stuff.’ They insist that their parents and grandparents have told them about how ‘hard’ it was in the old days. They often resolve this discrepancy by claiming that Mead’s informants must have been telling lies in order to tease her. That such a re-writing of history should be necessary is an indication of how completely the tone of sexual morality has changed.”¹⁸

Exposure in the media, especially as a result of the Mead-Freeman controversy, has made Samoans acutely aware of the risks of sharing their traditions with outsiders. They are sensitive to outsiders’ opinions and may be reluctant to talk about certain aspects of their culture. In writing about this sensitivity, a former Prime Minister of Samoa asked the following question:

Can or should we tell all we know about Samoan history and culture for general historical examination? The missionaries have imposed a Victorian prudishness on the national psyche to the extent that we have acquired a colossal hangup about ourselves and our culture. We have succumbed to a sanitized version of Samoan history, whether alien or indigenous, authored because it portrays an idealized Samoa. There is a strong sentiment about defending this idealization. There is an awful fear that if all is told the *palagi* [Europeans] will think less of us. Hence the penchant to camouflage, condense and edit.¹⁹

This dilemma of contemporary self-awareness is also found in other cultures. Anthropologist Annette Weiner, who worked in both the Trobriands and

Samoa, found that “Trobrianders often complained to me about the things that Bronisław Malinowski had ‘got wrong’ in his pioneering study in 1915. They rejected his writings that described them as ‘savages’ and ‘primitives’ and said that he exaggerated the idea of ‘free love.’ Today, some Trobrianders, educated and with Western values, are no happier about Malinowski’s interpretations than Samoans are about Mead’s account, because their perceptions of themselves within their own cultures are integrated with many Western values and ideas.”²⁰

The Many Layers of Samoan Culture

For the reasons just discussed, it is not easy to study sex in Samoa without understanding how Samoans view it and in what contexts they can or cannot talk about it. If sex in America is difficult to understand as well as to research, even though it is widely and openly discussed, imagine how difficult it is to do research on sexual conduct in a very different culture where conversations about sex are appropriate only in certain limited situations.

How well did Mead comprehend the shifting contexts of Samoan sexual conversations and sexual conduct? This question is part of a more general one that many ethnographers and others have wrestled with: Is it possible to get a single, consistent picture of what is going on? Linguist George Milner, who wrote the *Samoan Dictionary*, has referred to the “dialectical nature” of Samoan culture, in which “it is rare for information to be given, even from a reputedly sound and authentic source, without soon being contradicted from another reputed and equally reliable source.”²¹ Samoan historian Malama Meleise’a concurred, noting that Samoans operate in a world of multiple truths where “different versions of the truth are told to enhance the dignity of the teller’s ancestors, family, or village.”²² A number of anthropologists have also written about how Samoans can behave in seemingly contradictory ways, depending on the situation.²³

Mead wrote about these problems herself. She spoke of the common Samoan manipulation of social forms, altering things when necessary or convenient, and commented that Samoan “inconsistencies and fabrications were not promoted by any desire for remuneration but by the forces which make for variation in native life: family pride; love for constructing fanciful ceremonial edifices; and a desire to rearrange the social structure for personal preferment.”²⁴

Freeman argued that Mead did not understand the Samoan tradition of joking, or what O’Meara has called “recreational lying,” and that this basic misunderstanding led to Mead’s alleged hoaxing.²⁵ However, Mead herself wrote about how, during her fieldwork, it was necessary for her to “share their

jests and above all share their manners."²⁶ She was certainly aware of Samoan joking. Freeman himself quotes Mead expressing her concern about Samoans being "too ready liars" under certain circumstances.²⁷ Given Mead's knowledge of the language and her continual interaction with young Samoans, it is difficult to give the hoaxing allegation credence, although Samoans themselves have often believed it. Mead may not have understood everything that she encountered in Samoa, but she did understand a good deal.

Derek Freeman, Local Hero?

If Samoans often resented Mead, how did they feel about Freeman? In the early 1940s he was a well-liked schoolteacher who was adopted into a Samoan family and given a *manaia*, or princely, title, and who would come to identify closely with Samoans and their culture. Freeman became a very competent observer of Samoa, with a superior grasp of the language, culture, and history of the islands. He also took the side of Samoans in political matters, sometimes against the policies of the New Zealand colonial government. Given his expertise and his critique of Mead on their behalf, it seems reasonable to believe that Freeman would be viewed as a local hero in the islands. Indeed, this is how he portrayed himself.

Freeman claimed that he was asked to write *Margaret Mead and Samoa* by Samoans, to have written the book for Samoans, to have given it to Samoans for review and criticism, and to have been rewarded by them by being appointed a Foundation Professor of Anthropology at the University of Samoa. Yet, just as with *Coming of Age*, few Samoans read Freeman's first book about Mead and Samoa, and even fewer read his second book. *Margaret Mead and Samoa* was a weighty academic tome and not an easy read, even for educated Americans. Neither of Freeman's books was readily available for most Samoans to read, even if they had wanted to.

Many Samoans nevertheless knew about Freeman's books and about Freeman himself. There were many who liked Freeman, including some Samoan academics who found his work admirable and his "hoaxing hypothesis" convincing.²⁸ As Martin Orans learned, based on his fieldwork in Western Samoa, most Samoans welcomed Freeman's claim that Mead greatly exaggerated Samoan sexual promiscuity.²⁹ Yet Freeman's portrayal of Samoan culture, involving high levels of aggression, repression, conflict, delinquency, and rape, has not been viewed as an improvement over their conception of Mead's work. Some Samoans have asked, Are the fear and loathing of Freeman's darker Samoa a suitable replacement for Mead's warm and sunny vision?

Samoan political figures at the highest levels of government immediately weighed in with their opinions after the publication of *Margaret Mead and Samoa*. The Prime Minister of Western Samoa informed the *New York Times* that neither Freeman nor Mead was entirely accurate.³⁰ In a letter to the editor of *Newsweek* magazine, the wife of a former Samoan Prime Minister complained that "neither Margaret Mead or Derek Freeman represented our ancient land, its customs and its way of life. Both anthropologists missed the subtlety of behavior."³¹ In another letter to the editor, the Western Samoan representative to the United Nations, Lelei Lelaulu, asked: "Are we Samoans now to be known as a nation of sex-starved, suicidal rapists? I much prefer my previous reputation as a free-loving orgiast."³² He then suggested, in jest, that if anthropologists really wanted to study sex and conflict, they should go to another island—Manhattan, where he currently lived. Lelaulu also appeared on an NBC news program delivering the same satirical message.

Freeman cited the accomplished Samoan novelist and poet Albert Wendt as an influential and knowledgeable scholar who endorsed his views. Yet while Wendt was broadly supportive of Freeman's critique of Mead, he was cautious in his evaluation of Freeman's own motives and argument. Writing in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Wendt observed:

He [Freeman] has a deep love and respect for us. This I think helps to explain his almost obsessive quest to correct what he deems the wrong Margaret Mead did to us. Perhaps he has not felt at home in his own society and in understanding us hoped he would find a people to belong to, to champion, to be needed by . . .

The easily discernible flaws in Freeman's book stem mainly from its polemical form. To prove Mead wrong, some of his claims tend toward exaggeration and idealisation. (This idealisation is also perhaps the result of his profound trust in us.)

For instance, he is correct in stating that we place a great priority on female virginity, we institutionalise it in the *taupou*, we forbid premarital and extramarital sex and promiscuity but institutionalise bravado and machismo.

In sexual matters, Mead erred far too much on the side of free love and promiscuity, where Freeman errs on the side of sexual purity, strictness, and abstinence.³³

Tuaopepe Felix S. Wendt, another knowledgeable Samoan, had similar misgivings: "Some people have expressed the view that Freeman has done us (Samoans) a good turn by finally dispelling Mead's illusion of Samoa. Unfortunately, the more I re-read Freeman's book, the more difficulty I have what

constitutes this 'good turn.' Granted he has to a large extent succeeded in refuting Mead. But he has at the same time, contributed significantly to confirming another stereotype of Samoans—that they are temperamental and violent."³⁴ For a number of well-educated Samoans and Samoan scholars, then, Freeman's critique did not represent them either.³⁵

The most outspoken Samoan critic of Mead has been Malopa'upo Isaia, a young Samoan chief residing in Australia who has written about the controversy. Portraying the controversy as a cultural and political dispute between Samoans and American anthropologists over the intellectual property of Samoans, he believed that *Coming of Age in Samoa* was "professional racism under the guise of science." Malopa'upo listed thirty points of contention, asserting that "the truth is, billions of dollars in damages to our tourism industry, was the direct result of these slanderous 'scientific' claims," and he called for compensation to be paid for "business losses" attributable to Mead as well as other remedies from the American Anthropological Association.³⁶ This uniquely financial approach to the controversy did not develop a following among Samoans. In fact, Mead had helped put Samoa on the tourist map. Moreover, the tourism industry is only one sector of the economies of both American and Western Samoa, hardly the billion-dollar business that Malopa'upo believed. In light of these considerations Malopa'upo more recently has tempered his arguments.

Another vocal critic of Mead has been Samoan anthropologist Unasa L. F. Va'a, who received his Ph.D. from the Australian National University and who conducted interviews with Fa'apua'a for Freeman. As a result, he has been very close to the issues in the controversy. Unasa has contended that Mead's "free love" portrait of Samoa was "full of inconsistencies" and was a "sloppy piece of work" that "deserves to be ranked as one of the worst books of the 20th century."³⁷ The remaining question for him has been whether Mead was unwittingly misled by Samoans or whether she was deliberately misleading. Making many of the same points as Freeman, he has focused on what he believes Mead missed or misunderstood. Ironically, as a boy, Unasa was featured in the 1953 film *Return to Paradise*, starring Gary Cooper and shot on location in Western Samoa. The movie draws on some of the stereotypes that Samoans now find unacceptable.

For most Samoans, though, the controversy has remained something of a mystery. Samoan author Sia Figiel captured this sense of perplexity in her novel, *Where We Once Belonged*, in a humorous conversation between two fictional Samoan schoolgirls:

One day our teacher, Miss Faafouina, showed us an article from *Time* magazine, an article which was supposed to be about us . . . one we were supposed to be very interested in. The article was written on Samoa and

the "Mead-Freeman Controversy." None of us knew what the controversy was. None of us knew what the word controversy meant.

Because she spoke so quickly, I did not understand anything in the article. Later on I asked a girl from Malifa to explain to me what Miss Faafouina had talked about in class. This is how she explained it.

Mead was a palagi [European] woman who wrote a book on Samoan girls doing "it" a lot . . . and they were loving and loved "it" too. Freeman was a palagi man who said that Mead, the palagi woman, was wrong about Samoan girls doing "it" a lot . . . and the Samoans are jealous, hateful, murderous people who do not know how to do "it."

That evening I told Lili and Moa what the girl from Malifa explained to me. Lili looked at me and laughed.

"How do you think she knew?" she said.

"Who? What?" I asked.

"How did the palagi woman know that we do 'it' a lot?"

"You do 'it' a lot, not *we*," said Moa to Lili.

"Malo [good] Moa!" I laughed.

"And what about the palagi man?" I asked. "What about him? How does he know that we . . . I mean, that people like Lili don't do it a lot?"

"I don't know," said Moa. "Maybe he was talking to someone like Fauakafe, who'll be a spinster for the already rest of her life . . . or to some *matai* [chiefs], like your father, who are too embarrassed to tell palagis where their hundreds of children come from."³⁸

The Relevance of the Controversy for Samoans Today

A cartoon in a Samoan newspaper, the *Observer*, in 1983 smartly summarized the contemporary relevance of the controversy for Samoans. A European character asks a Samoan, "Which Samoa is this—Mead's or Freeman's?" The Samoan responds, "Neither—This is the real Samoa!"³⁹ He is surrounded by graphs showing rising consumer prices, import duties, school fees, and travel charges. For most Samoans, the rapid changes resulting from globalization have transformed the islands in so many ways as to render the controversy academic. In their books on Samoa, Mead and Freeman did not situate their fieldwork in a broader historical context, but this context is important for understanding what the controversy means to Samoans today.

When Mead did her fieldwork in Manu'a in the mid-1920s and when Freeman did his first fieldwork on Upolu in Western Samoa in the early 1940s, most Samoans lived in relatively small villages and supported themselves by growing coconuts, taro, bananas, and breadfruit; by raising pigs and chickens; and by

fishing inside and outside the coral reefs that surround the islands. Village life structured adolescent experience. Each village was composed of extended families, and each family selected a chief (*matai*) to lead the family and to represent it in village matters through the village council (*fono*). Chiefs controlled the family labor force and the redistribution of wealth within and between families. Since the village economy was based on agriculture and family membership meant access to agricultural land, young people worked for their families and were expected to serve their chiefs.

The village council controlled the behavior of individual villagers and families through its ability to fine them and to sometimes ostracize a troublemaker. Chiefs were hierarchically ranked and competed with each other for prestige and additional chiefly titles, also requiring family members' labor and support. So there were strong pressures toward conformity within the family and within the village.

For families and villages to run smoothly, individual emotions had to be controlled and mobilized. Boys and girls grew up in the same roles as their mothers and fathers. Christian churches provided a religious justification for the village social order and sanctions of their own. Although it was not a perfectly functioning system, there were fewer roles and fewer choices to be made than in America at that time.

Since Mead's time, village life in American Samoa has been greatly eroded by urbanization, a cash economy, migration abroad, and changing traditions. As American Samoa became more urban and more American during the post-World War II era, the traditional system of family and village authority was undermined by the expansion of a nonagricultural cash economy. Young people found wage employment in the islands. The control formerly exercised by the *matai* and the village council decreased. In the urban area surrounding Pago Pago, the traditional system of authority has been in decline, and individualism has increased, with predictable consequences.

In 1974 Lowell Holmes reported:

In the more urban villages of Tutuila, councils do little of a punitive nature. Violations of law tend to become police matters rather than council matters. Pago Pago area households are extremely fluid in composition. People come and go and rarely develop any sense of belonging or loyalty. Delinquency in the form of property destruction, truancy, pilfering, and drunkenness has become a major problem for teenagers. The High Court of American Samoa now employs a juvenile office and special counselors and has inaugurated new procedures to involve the delinquent's *matai*, and thus reinstate something of the *fa'a-Samoa* [Samoan custom] influence in the regulation of behavior among young people.⁴⁰

While young American Samoans are having more problems coming of age in the islands today, the majority of them no longer even live there. Over the past four decades there has been a major exodus from both American Samoa and independent Samoa. American Samoans have migrated to Hawai'i and the West Coast of the mainland United States. People from independent Samoa have migrated to New Zealand, American Samoa, the United States, Australia, and at least three dozen other countries. The majority of Samoans now reside permanently overseas.

This massive emigration has been vital to the economic well-being of relatives remaining in the islands, for relatives abroad send millions of dollars in remittances to the islands each year. In independent Samoa, remittances became the single most important source of personal income, providing a much higher standard of living than would have otherwise been possible. Opportunities for employment overseas continue to draw young Samoans abroad, where they have more individual choice than they had in traditional villages, often marrying non-Samoans.

The two Samoas have had very different economic and political trajectories. American Samoans have been aided by many federally funded programs and by open access to the United States. However, independent Samoa has had to cope with severe economic problems over the last three decades and has had to respond to changing immigration policies in the countries to which its migrants travel. The current economic and political difficulties of Samoa have weighed heavily on the young people remaining behind. They are on the margins of an economy that cannot fulfill their rising expectations. Many are well educated and are not interested in returning to village agriculture, while jobs in the port town are scarce. International migration may be their best option, but permanent visas are sometimes difficult to obtain.

These economic pressures in addition to the obligations to serve one's family have led to an increase in delinquency and alcohol abuse in the Apia urban area in independent Samoa. By the early 1980s the decline of traditional family authority in Samoa had become so pronounced that the Prime Minister wanted to institute military discipline in school with the help of the United States Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Of course, as a foreign country, Samoa was not eligible for ROTC programs, but his concern was nevertheless genuine.⁴¹

Young Samoans in independent Samoa have often been abroad temporarily and are immersed in American movies, music, and clothes. Pirated CDs of the most recent music and DVDs of the most recent films are readily available; cell phones are becoming ubiquitous, as are iPods. In Apia there is some gang activity based on their overseas experiences. These young Samoans are more

aware of overseas lifestyles and opportunities than their parents ever were. They have also been committing suicide at an alarming rate.

Beginning in the 1970s, the suicide rate among young people in independent Samoa increased sharply to one of the highest rates in the world for the age group between fifteen and twenty-four.⁴² Although Freeman found that youth suicide in Samoa was already high in the period from 1925 to the 1960s, he did not discuss the sixfold increase in youth suicide between 1970 and 1982. A high rate of suicide has continued into the twenty-first century. Freeman emphasized the persistence of tradition and its interaction with adolescent biology in his explanation of youth suicide, but a more plausible explanation may lie in the different economic and political opportunity structures in the two Samoas, since the suicide rate in American Samoa has been considerably lower than in independent Samoa.⁴³

Whatever Samoan adolescence was like during Mead's fieldwork in the mid-1920s or Freeman's fieldwork in the early 1940s, it has become increasingly problematic for young Samoans both in the islands and abroad. In California, anthropologist Craig Janes chronicled how high levels of unemployment, poverty, and welfare led to increased stress and diseases like obesity, diabetes, and stroke.⁴⁴ On the West Coast and in Salt Lake City, gang warfare among Polynesians, including Samoans, has taken a tragic toll.⁴⁵ In New Zealand the increasing number of unintended pregnancies among young, unwed Samoan women is viewed by the Samoan community itself as a problem. Between 1990 and 1992 the estimated abortion rate for Pacific Islands women living in New Zealand was almost three times as high as for non-Pacific Islands women.⁴⁶ To respond to these and other problems of coming of age abroad, Samoans have formed new organizations. In this rapidly changing context the Mead-Freeman controversy, however significant it may have been in terms of Samoan identity, is of only marginal relevance to their lives today.