

Bill Portela

***Coming of Age in Samoa, Margaret Mead,
and the False Dilemma of "Nature versus Nurture"***

As the centennial anniversary of Margaret Mead's superlative work *Coming of Age in Samoa, A Study of Adolescence and Sex in Primitive Society* approaches, the associated controversy has hardly diminished in the intervening, hundred years. Written in 1928 at the young age of 27, *Coming of Age in Samoa* was hailed as the quintessential anthropological work, while later being dismissed as unscientific, and for espousing liberal propaganda. Unfortunately, exceptional woman researchers such as Mead, Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and others were routinely rejected by their male colleagues and critics. Margaret Mead's study of island life remains an evolutionary lightning rod encompassing an oft-quoted bedrock of the nature versus nurture debate. The essence of these skirmishes involve the variability of human conduct and cultural norms based on either our environment or genetics. Are humans blank behavioral canvasses waiting to be sketched-in-total by their surroundings?

Mead lived amongst the soon to be predominantly Christian Samoans for under a year on their island chain east of Australia. In her splendidly readable chronicles, she describes an easy-going and sexually fluid society where adolescents don't suffer the stigmatized trauma experienced in most western cultures. Unsure juveniles experiment with their budding passions under a loose but all-present web of caring adults. Newer research establishes a resolute connection between instinctual behaviors (nature) across mammals, primates, and hominids (great apes) such as ourselves. Perhaps Mead's take on complex relationships was antiquated, naïve, or faulty. Surprisingly, in her writing, there are few inferences slanted against the influence of Darwin's biological dogma, DNA, and our inherent instinctual behaviors.

Jumping to the much-heralded nurture-bombshell quote in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead introduces her problem statement succinctly: "Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?" Perhaps providing forewarning of our now familiar Internet meme/fake-news cycles, both the nature and nurture crowds were *adjusting* Mead's reporting to suit their own political agendas. Mead would then, like the later-following researchers' Jane Goodall with chimpanzees, and Dian Fossey with gorillas, immerse herself into exotic surroundings to provide the reader detailed and fascinating vignettes of how an isolated, clan-based society lives, loves and passes-on its tribal customs while surrounded by the warm, azure waters of the South Pacific.

Were deep human instincts honed to function more adeptly in intimate tribe settings? Mead illuminates how island girls and then young women, navigated the culturally accepted progression of age-related activities in daily Samoan life. Infants and toddlers were carefully chaperoned by moms and then siblings and relatives. At the same time, older children were gradually introduced to more expansive tasks such as babysitting, cleaning, cooking, gathering, weaving, and actively supporting the many inter-clan activities, celebrations, births, deaths, and seasonal festivities.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

The initial breakout popularity of *Coming of Age in Samoa* was in no small part due to Mead's vivid, narrative style and colorful depictions of an almost dream-like, primeval lifestyle rich in personal involvement. A sand-sculptured paradise where all individuals were integral facets of a vibrant, humming tribal milieu.

Androcentric perspectives (male-biased) still permeate accepted science, and Mead's insights were often critiqued as simplistic and unscientific by male colleagues. In Mead's instance, however, she also dared to expose gender-based hindrances as she analyzed why Samoan girls were more or less: popular, sexual, delinquent, productive, or resourceful. Regarding Goodall and Fossey, their comparisons of chimpanzee and gorilla interactions to similar human dynamics bordered on evolutionary heresy at the time. With Mead, her insight into how girls on the archipelago adapted to their more inclusive and watchful clan hierarchy, was attacked as non-rigorous, liberalized rattletrap. Assuredly, higher-level observations, based on the complex behaviors of hominids, including ourselves undoubtedly departs somewhat from the clinical, precise, data-based world of statistics, morphology (body frames and skeletal dimensions), or intricate DNA sequences. But the genuine scientific questions remain fundamentally simple. Are the researcher's conclusions reasonable? Does the anthropological synthesis raise our awareness and help us grasp possible avenues into evolutionary cause and effect?

In Goodall's work, for example, we find thousands of data points related to what chimpanzees eat, what they then excrete, what ailments they suffer, who associates with whom, and where precisely different community members spend what portion of which season. Each individual's life history is cataloged and mapped in as much detail as possible to chart group relationships, personal interactions, and bonds between generations or siblings. But clearly, the most stunning revelations from Jane Goodall's *Chimpanzees of Gombe, Patterns of Behavior* are not one by one, the intricate details regarding the typical, humdrum daily routine of each chimpanzee. After synthesizing the innumerable fragments of information, Goodall's remarkable presumption was both elegant and astounding; human beings may not be as far removed from other hominids as we were led to believe! Our kind may indeed be soundly tethered to both our evolutionary history and resulting instinctual patterns (nature).

In likewise fashion, Margaret Mead lays her foundation by documenting both the routine and standout experiences of a typical Samoan girl from birth to death. But in 1928, at the scientific level of understanding then prevalent, human brains were "black boxes." This is changing now. We now realize many of our behavior sets have deeply-programmed neural components residual from our previous reptilian, mammalian, and then primate developmental incarnations (the triune brain hypothesis). None of us, for example, synchronize each heartbeat, nor do we consciously regulate our body temperature. We have no need to mentally muster veritable armies of immune-response cells to the hundreds of bacterial, viral, protist, and fungal invaders we encounter every hour. Reactions, such as fight-or-flight responses, have physiological and instinctual components. But determining the causality of why one person's actions differentiate from their cohort's, within a complex web of complicated human

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

social interactions remains challenging into the present day.

But like Jane Goodall's treatise on chimpanzees, Mead's crucial insight is her unparalleled integration, or upper-level hypothesis, regarding how the differences between two disparate social environments, western populated versus south sea island tribal—reshaped the life-long experiences of adolescent women. Mead highlights the variability of human personalities based on their surroundings (nurture). But by no means is she rallying against nature's stamp concerning human conduct.

Mead describes how children are assigned new community tasking as their physical or maturity levels grow onto the next productive layer of responsibility. She illustrates how flowering developmental sexuality transports teens into provocative and exciting new intrigues. Decidedly, Mead does not characterize the pulsing hormonal-body chemistries now fashioning hardened musculature, adult body hair, and the growth of mature sex organs. Yet she vividly narrates the many related life-cycle upheavals accompanying puberty. After menarche (first occurrence of menstruation), Samoan girls no longer participate in some activities when menstruating, and both genders are characterized as engaging in exploratory homosexual and masturbational encounters with partners of either gender. Mead's descriptions add spirited texture to our understanding of Samoan life without establishing an undue bias for environmental factors.

To maintain the proper historical perspective, a quarter of a century after Mead's work on Samoa, the mechanisms of genetic transfer via DNA molecules would first be described by Watson, Crick, and Rosalind Franklin. An additional 25 years later, Richard Dawkins' provocative "Selfish Gene" theories pressed a compelling argument for the role of genes and instincts carrying upward across biological platforms, including our own. An excellent litmus test for Mead's unbiased accounting remains her probing, fact-based narration of the mild or perhaps *ceremonial* patriarchy found on the islands. Even today, many researchers fail to characterize the immense societal impact caused by gender-differentiated control architectures. Instead of glossing over or creatively manipulating the gender-resource constructs, Mead steadfastly narrates how male *Matais* become holders of titles and heads of households.

In contrast, she explains, *Taupos* are ceremonial village hostesses held in high regard. *Aumagas* constitute organizations of untitled men, while *Aualumas* are social groups composed of unmarried girls after puberty, wives of untitled men, and widows. Describing unattached ingenues as they advance into their mid-twenties, Mead finds no high-minded sugar coating to the traditional concept that young women alter their community flight paths to seek a mate. "The first preoccupation with sex experimentation has worn out, and she settles down to increase her value as a wife." Are Mead's observations dated, or are men and women programmed to fill different roles in society? Unlike most researchers, Mead carefully provided exceptional insight into gender interplays as she, for example, informed us how older men fell out of community power layers while matriarchs often became more integral to the community as healers, midwives, and behind-the-scenes brokers of family or clan resources and relationships.

In the concluding chapters, Mead contrasts how island clans had

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

grown beyond senseless intra-tribe warring while western societies continued to squander countless lives—battling state versus state and religion against religion. Her characterization adroitly portrays how, unlike many of the world's cultures, Samoan villages seemed to be reasonably egalitarian (equitable) between feminine and masculine directives and influences. Mead shared how: the wives of *Matais* also wield substantial leverage, island resources were not routinely wasted in massive wars and intrigues (orchestrated by men), and all inhabitants, including young women, had relative autonomy by being able to move in with preferred family members or relatives. "The men rule partly by the authority conferred by their titles, but their wives and sisters rule by force of personality and knowledge of human nature."

Were Mead's examples of feminine influence too much for men-folk researchers? Mead's narrative never argues against the forces of nature or instincts. What Mead does indeed critique rather convincingly, is the *nurture problem* experienced by isolated, nucleus-family settings within large, westernized cultures. And her cautionary advice is even more relevant now in a time of endless cultural memes and monetized propaganda available 24-7 via corporate, Internet-based information streams. We are all now becoming horrifyingly immune to the mass shootings, hatred, controversy, and turmoil continually tweeting across our connected devices. Wouldn't most of us long to escape to a tropical island where the drama of the day centered on which pairs of clandestine, midnight lovers were spied upon by their whisper-giggling, younger siblings.

Mead's ominous warning proves *Coming of Age in Samoa* is more pertinent now than when first published. "The diversity of standards in present-day society is so striking that the dullest, the most incurious, cannot fail to notice it." Probably, Margaret Mead comes under fire most often by conservative theorists bristling at her conclusions that western social systems don't prove to be *just dandy* for everyone. As Mead knew then, and as most of us are deducing now, inefficient patriarchies (capitalist, socialist, communist, etc.), tend to grind down their lower echelons while rewarding their leaders richly. Mead laments the double standards, inequality, and hypocrisy of, for example, constitutions that guarantee freedoms only to the prevailing ethnicity. She notes that spiritual morality appears so arbitrarily defined by each practitioner often in apparent conflict to the underlying covenants. Admittedly, many of Mead's cultural linkage effects, as applied to individual island girl proclivities, are speculative. Employing the Freudian-rich analysis in vogue at the time, Mead does her best to explain why specific girls behaved in the manner observed. Is it then appropriate for her detractors to consider her science as non-rigorous? Unmistakably, this would be a case of missing the anthropological rainforest through the swaying palms.

The strength in Margaret Mead's pioneering work is her attempt to categorize the ramifications when caring, and resilient cultural supports are contrasted with the impersonal and isolated non-tribal surroundings now becoming commonplace worldwide. One could take Mead's summaries to a logical conclusion that large, detached (now technology-centric) societies do not fulfill a natural tendency in humans to prosper more fundamentally with *unanimous* community oversight and a shared vision of goals and values. Our larger brains differentiate primates from most living

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

creatures (but not whales, dolphins, or elephants). These advanced social families show levels of peaceful, matriarchal influence unmatched—in humans. The nature-aspect of our social, neural wiring might indeed be pre-programmed to acclimate to higher levels of personalized involvement within a village of caring, unified, and engaged kin. In her appendices, Mead describes how the Samoans seemed to have incorporated a perhaps accidental yet beneficial mix of westernized-Christian laws, beliefs, and customs. These new societal influences helped mitigate some of the older, authoritarian, and more brutal aspects of island life while maintaining a conforming, cooperative developmental clan dynamic.

Mead pines for a tolerant society where all people are free to follow their dreams, experiment with different values, and select the optimum choices for their individual lifestyles. And this is perhaps where some of Mead's reporters misinterpret the overall tenor of her work. A crucial, evolutionary dilemma for any anthropologist remains to reconcile the nature of innate, instinctual thought patterns with a contemporary, jumble of often-contradictory trends and opaque power regimes. *Coming of Age in Samoa* puts forth an invaluable thesis in how later, socially advanced *Homo sapiens* or humans, mesh within their clan surroundings—urban or island. Due to the inherent challenges involved with mapping individual human behavioral causality with discrete environmental inputs, Mead might certainly not have gotten everything “right.” Each reader should be made aware, however, of one stark, Darwinian ultimate truth. Of perhaps hundreds of competing human-like families and ethnicities, only one interbreeding *Homo* species walked out of the Pleistocene epoch 12-thousand years ago. And it might have been our improved social cohesion, capability for language, and our ability to impart complex tribal wisdom to our kindred in a tightly-coherent cooperative, which allowed us to replace every *Homo* genus-group on our world.

In the Samoan culture of the previous century, children received a unified perspective on tribal life from their entire community. We, instead, receive our diametrically opposed *nurturement* from across the kitchen table and our connected devices. How then should we integrate personal choice, varied spiritual doctrines, diverse ethnic cultures, and a wide-open spectrum of political thinking into a mostly *allied* set of foundation directives that traverse different societies and nations? Mead's attempt to place an anthropological jumble of juxtaposing evidence, into a highly readable journal of observational origins across two disparate cultures was exceptional. Mead never fell prey to the “false binary” logic, now encountered continually in our so-called news analysis and opinion. The reports of Margaret Mead's bias for nurture have been greatly exaggerated. Mead ponders the root causes of the many inconsistencies and failings within now impersonal (non-tribal), westernized societies. But in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Margaret Mead steadfastly interweaves sound anthropological methods to spotlight her valuable analysis. Mead's conclusions aren't all perfect. But she poses the *ideal* questions, and in doing so, confers to us the most precious gift in science. She instructs us on how to go forward to fashion potential solutions.