

Review: Tuaopepe Felix S. Wendt
Western Samoa

I have no claim to expertise in the realm of anthropology that would necessarily qualify me to comment on this publication by Professor Derek Freeman. Therefore my contribution to the current debate will be made simply as a Samoan and a participant in the culture about which these renowned anthropologists, Mead and Freeman, have written.

I was thirteen years old when I first came across *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead. That was in 1951, some twenty-six years after Mead had spent nine months on Taū in American Samoa doing the field-work that became the basis of her book. Prior to that, I had never heard of Margaret Mead (and I do not think very many of my peers at that time had either), nor had I been aware of any controversy concerning her work in Samoa.

As a young intermediate-school student at the time, my initial interest in the book centered on that fact that it was, supposedly, about Samoa.

However, as I read through the book I found myself asking the questions, "Is this really true?" "Where is Taū, this place that Mead is talking about?" I was having great difficulty recognizing the Samoa Mead wrote about.

Up to age thirteen I had lived in Apia (the, village, not the town) where my family (*aiga*) had been one of the principal families to found the Congregational Church of Jesus in Samoa, a breakaway group from the LMS church. My grandfather, my father, several uncles, and other family members were lay pastors for the church. We later lived at Malie where my father was for many years the lay pastor for the church, and in Lefaga where my father held the family title Tuaepepe. Growing up for me was, therefore, very much in the "*faa-Samoa*," in a rather strict religious environment.

For me, Margaret Mead's idyllic, romantic description of Samoa, with its easy life, free love, and uncomplicated adolescence, was always a myth, a dreamworld. It was nothing like the real world I grew up in. In fact, if anything, the romanticism of Mead's writings prompted in me a wishful yearning to be in that paradise with all that free love and carefree life.

There was no doubt in my mind, nor in the minds of my classmates, that Dr. Mead was describing something in her own mind and imagination. As we used to say at the time "*Manaia tele mafaufauga ole teine. Maimau pe ana moni*" (The girl's thoughts are nice but if only they were true). But then it was not too difficult to guess why Margaret Mead got carried away in 1925--a young woman of twenty-three, unattached, raised with the attitudes about young people and sex no doubt typical of the eastern United States--and it seems very likely that a lot of her findings and conclusions reflected her own wishful yearning to be part of a society where life was not complicated by the social turmoil and "hang-ups" found in her own society.

By the time I first left Samoa at age seventeen in 1956 for New Zealand to continue my education, I had read Mead's book three or four times. By then I had gotten over my own fantasies and wishful thinking. Like many other young, educated Samoans at the time, I was firm in my assessment that many of the things Margaret Mead said about Samoans were incorrect. However, in New Zealand and elsewhere, what we knew and felt was unimportant and mattered little to the intellectually knowledgeable.

My training in the sciences has given me a great appreciation of the scientific method and its use as a research tool. I wholeheartedly agree that Dr. Mead's findings were based on superficial and shoddy research

techniques, and I have, over the years, been unable to excuse her on the grounds of lack of knowledge of the scientific method. I have great admiration for her achievements and acknowledge her to be the intellectual giant of social science that she came to be; but because she did not have the courage to reassess and recheck her work in Samoa, I can only reaffirm to myself that she was completely misled about Samoa.

Like most Samoans who travelled and went to school overseas, I have had to live with Margaret Mead's Samoa, the way in which, invariably, I was perceived by most European (*palagi*) people. Over the years I have developed a thick skin and the ability to simply ignore or explain away the questions on free love. And as one of my friends expressed it while we were attending school in New Zealand, if some people refuse to believe otherwise and expect me to be "with it with the ladies then why shouldn't I capitalize on it? After all the lie is not mine."

A good half-century has lapsed since *Coming of Age in Samoa* was first published. While our outrage in the early years against our portrayal as a joyously promiscuous society mattered little to the intellectual world, the damage Margaret Mead did has, with time, healed. We learned to live with it. As advances in communication made the world smaller, Samoa opened up to the world at large. Through actual experience many people found out for themselves that Margaret Mead's Samoa was, for the most part, a myth.

Now in 1983 comes Professor Derek Freeman with his book, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Professor Freeman, whose acquaintance with Samoa spans some forty years, and who regards himself as an authority on Samoans and things Samoan, set out to refute Dr. Mead. This he has very ably done. His meticulous presentation of historical and statistical evidence is overwhelming. His use of the scientific method, step by step, breaking down each of Mead's findings, shows why they cannot be accepted as valid. Logically, he arrives at the conclusion that Margaret Mead's findings "are fundamentally in error and some of them are preposterously false." There is no doubt in my mind that Freeman's book is a major achievement in research and scholarship, and will add significantly to the body of knowledge of Pacific societies and their cultures. I am, to a certain degree, thankful to Professor Freeman that his work has finally produced the documented evidence considered credible enough by the intellectual world to substantiate the doubt we Samoans have always had regarding the truthfulness and accuracy of Mead's findings.

However, some fifty-five years after the fact, when Samoans have learned to live with Mead's myth (and in a way risen above it), do we

really need such a refutation? What good does it do in 1983 to finally have Mead's 1928 findings proved false? Is it possible that Freeman has created another image, possibly another myth, of the Samoans? That "violent, competitive, extremely puritanical, delinquent, rape and suicide prone, Jehovah dominated, and rank-bound people"? Even if I am to concede that Freeman is correct in his findings, the important question now is what will this description do to us?

This is where I have great difficulty crediting the motives said to lie behind this study. Some people have stated that Freeman's "love" for Samoa and Samoans motivated him to "champion" their cause, and he set out to undo the damage Mead had done. Unfortunately, I do not think very many Samoans (myself included) are applauding a champion who has made them appear like the gang of hoods in Charles Bronson's "Death Wish II." In the words of one of my lawyer friends who doubted there were many Samoans of either Mead's or Freeman's types, if these were the only choices, he "was sure to God" he did not want to be the latter.

At that, I began to wonder out loud whether Freeman's labor was one of love (based on his own personal "feeling" for Samoa), or one directed more by the intense emotions of some of his principal collaborators and informants, staunch advocates of Samoan puritanism as adhered to and preached by many of the Protestant congregational denominations in Samoa. This strong sense of evangelical purity comes through loud and clear and has greatly influenced Freeman's analysis and reconstruction of the so-called "Samoan Ethos." A "Thou shalt not, Moses complex" pervades his conclusion that "for most Samoans, there is no escape from the insistent demands of their society, one of its fundamental principles being that anyone who disobeys the instructions of those in authority should be duly punished." Further, "while Samoans frequently talk of the boundless love of Jehovah, they also view him as a God who may become 'full of anger for sinful people', and who will strike down, in infirmity or death, those who have broken his commandments."

In other words, "Jehovah is believed by Samoans to be a punishing God, and the punishment he metes out, while it is greatly feared, is also looked upon as being God's chosen and just way of dealing with the willfully disobedient." The evidence, as Freeman interprets it, suggests that the "punitive regime has long been endemic among Samoans ever since their conversion to Christianity, and has been justified in terms of the principles by which Jehovah Himself is believed to rule Samoa--punishment having become culturally established as the sovereign way of dealing with those (including children) who do not heed the dictates of authority."

Freeman duly provides an impressive array of evidence to support his interpretation that Samoans give preeminence to the Jehovah concept of authority and punishment. However, it must also be stressed that this same Samoan ethos recognizes that Jehovah is a God of great and unending love. Though Freeman duly acknowledges this, it is almost as an afterthought: "The Samoans do indeed have a 'dark side' to their lives. . . . And, as with all human societies, they also have their shining virtues" (p. 278). Thus his conclusions and findings are overstated, biased, and weighted very much with this "thou shalt not, Moses complex." The evidence, the statistics are too exact, too much like a scientific experiment designed to prove that Samoans are Jehovah-ridden, violent, competitive, prone to assault, manslaughter, rape, and jealousy, rather than to prove Margaret Mead's nature-nurture and negative instance theories wrong.

I contend that the (overriding characteristic of the Samoan ethos is *alofa* (love); *alofa* is the foundation of the total *fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way of life). *Alofa* in the Samoan ethos is not just "shining virtues" as Freeman portrays it. I find Freeman patronizing and paternalistic, in spite of his claim to be an authority on Samoa, as he quotes other palagi authorities on the shining virtues of Samoans: "lively, jocose, kind people" (Wilhams); "a people more prepossessing in appearance and manner" (Erskine); "the most polite of Pacific peoples" (Sabatier); "Samoans are wonderfully hospitable and generous. . . . [They] can display great magnanimity"; "[There is] no more memorable instance of the kindness of Samoans than the road that a group of high ranking chiefs built for Robert Louis Stevenson . . ." (Freeman). In making this contention, I am well aware that some quarters of the academic world will demand proof and corroborative evidence. I have none, other than the fact that I am a Samoan.

Alofa is the principal component of the Samoan ethos. That concept is instilled from birth, as Samoans are taught about the importance of every bond: *Alofa i lou matua* (love your parents); *Alofa i lou aiga* (love your family); *Alofa i lou nu'u* (love your village); *Alofa i lou itumalo*, (love your district); *Alofa i lou Atunuu* (love your country). *Alofa* is sharing, giving, helping, responding, and contributing to the needs of others. It is willing participation in ones family, village, and community affairs. It is love expressed physically in the giving and receiving of material goods and services, the confirmation of being a part of the social group. *Alofa* is not, extolled simply as an ideal when the chiefs meet in village council, as Freeman makes it out to be. It permeates all levels of the social life of Samoa. It is the essence of the "bright side" of Samoan life, which far outshines the "darker side" that Freeman has dwelt on with such excess. To

ensure a balanced perception of Samoans with regard to the darker and brighter sides (and more so, to be fair to us), Freeman should have analyzed in depth and discussed in equal detail those facets of Samoan life that relate to and are based on alofa. These include the sharing, giving and receiving of goods and help in *faalavelave*, be it a birth, wedding, funeral, house-, church-, or school-building, or plantation work, fishing, travelling, care of the young, the elderly, and the sick; the social norms regarding illegitimacy and the treatment of unwed mothers and illegitimate children; and the *ifoga*.

The *fa'atamālii* that Freeman describes as “conduct characteristic of an aristocrat,” refers to chiefly rank, but the form of behavior it engenders--*tu fa'atamālii* (behaving like an aristocrat), *amioga fa'atamālii* (behavior becoming a person of good breeding)--is sought after, taught to, encouraged and inculcated in every Samoan from birth. Thus Samoan generosity is not mere face-saving, superficial, impassive hospitality, motivated by gentle, passive obedience, but *alofa fa'atamālii*—love extended by giving and sharing the best there is available. I am certain that Freeman himself, in his forty year acquaintance with Samoa, can vouch for alofa fa'atamālii through his own personal experiences. The *fa'atamālii* of Tamasese Lealofi III, when he admonished that peace must be maintained at any price, was not prompted by authority, rank, or supremacy, but by the greater feeling of *alofa ile atunuu* (love for his people).

Freeman seems to have spent the best part of some forty years working on his refutation of Margaret Mead. During that same period, he studied Samoans and Samoa: he adopted (or was adopted by) a Samoan family at Sa'anapu (a village adjacent to my own at Legaga) where he eventually acquired a *matai* title; he learned the language and speaks it well (so I am told); he has lived “like a Samoan” for lengthy periods; he understands and knows Samoan custom and the *faaSamoa*; and he loves and respects Samoa and things Samoan. But in spite of all this, what I found missing from the book was a “feeling” for things Samoan as a Samoan. In this respect; Freeman, like many other palagi I know of, learned Samoan, lived, dressed and behaved as a Samoan, respected and loved Samoa, but is still “pseudo-Samoan” in that he did not and could not feel as a Samoan does. Most of these people (and Freeman, it appears to me, is no exception) had their own “hang-ups” just as Mead did. They came to Samoa (ironically many lured and attracted ‘by what Mead wrote) hoping to find something, some place, some people to identify with and to belong to. They probably felt lost, alienated in their own countries, especially those in which material wealth and affluence have sapped much of the humanness of society. Freeman found something in Samoa he had lacked else-

where. But while he might have become a Samoan in nearly every way possible, he was still a palagi inside. No true Samoan who “feels” things Samoan would cultivate the confidence, the trust, and faith of his people in order to become privy to their “secrets” and intimate personal lives, then turn around and expose these “secrets” publicly to the world, and with much exaggeration, imagination, idealization, perhaps even to the extent of purposeful misinterpretation.

Freeman readily dismisses the “reaction of some Samoans” that “Mead lied,” that her Samoan “informants must have been telling lies in order to tease her.” He states that Samoans themselves have offered the explanation in the form of behavior called *tau fa’ase’e*, which literally means deliberately duping someone. Freeman, from his knowledge of Samoa, knows very well that *tau fa’ase’e* does involve deliberate telling of half-truths or lies. It generally occurs when the respondent gives the answer that he/she knows is what the questioner wants to hear, even though the respondent knows it is not the truth. Thus the example he quotes from Milne, “*e fa’ase’e gofie le teine*, the girl is easily duped,” describes that form of behavior in Samoan boyfriend-girlfriend, man-woman relationships wherein the boy/man tells the girl/woman what she wants to hear, even though he knows (in fact, most times she knows it too) that it is a half-truth or a lie. It is to be noted that the opposite also happens just as frequently, “*e fa’ase’e gofie le tama*, the boy is easily duped.” It is a form of flattery and sex play.

Freeman, however, goes on to state that there is no detailed corroborative evidence to confirm the truth of this Samoan claim that Mead was “mischievously duped” by her adolescent informants. Be that as it may, if Mead was not the victim of *tau fa’ase’e* (I personally believe, as do most Samoans of my generation, that Mead was duped), then she must have purposely, deliberately, and knowingly given incorrect information on Samoa, thereby misleading the intellectual world. This in Samoan is *tau fa’asesē*, the deliberate action of telling falsehoods to mislead other people. In other words, as Freeman himself concludes, Mead’s findings “are fundamentally in error and some of them are preposterously false.” If this is so, then to my layman’s mind Margaret Mead lied about Samoa. But oddly enough, Freeman does not agree with this. Why? Clearly, either Mead was the victim of *tau fa’ase’e* or she was the perpetrator of *tau fa’asesē* or he has some doubt about the integrity of his own informants—might they be duping him too? Or is he himself behaving *tau fa’asesē*?

Some people have expressed the view that Freeman has done us (Samoans) a good turn by finally dispelling Mead’s illusion of Samoa. Unfor-

tunately, the more I re-read Freeman's book, the more difficulty I have identifying 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. While Mead's work was tainted very much by romantic notions and the wishful thinking of a young woman seeking her ideal society, it is possible that Freeman's conclusions reflect the disenchantment of another palagi academic who, in his search for his ideal society, in living and trying to become a Samoan, has, over a forty-year period, grown old and disillusioned with the changing faces of Samoa?

Samoans are human like everyone else, and always have been, even way back in the early 1920s. We have always been and still are a sexually tolerant and gentle people. As with people the world over, we have our joys and our sorrows, we can cry, get angry, and sometimes have fights. But our darker side is no darker than that of any other people. If we are so much more prone to assault, manslaughter, and forceful rape as Freeman has made us out to be, how many times during his forty years of experience in Samoa was he abused, sworn at, or even punched in the face by a Samoan? Was his wife or daughter ever sexually molested?

If as a matai he participated in village *fono* at Sa'anapu, and their collective experience was "much given to extolling obedience as the essential basis of virtue and concord," and if as a matai he himself "condemned freedom of action as the source of sin and social disorder," then in such a setting, even I would be disillusioned. In that respect, I am glad my village fono (as with most other village fono's in Samoa) has much more important things to discuss than merely insisting on obedience and curtailing people's freedom to act.