

Lola Romanucci-Ross, *Mead's Other Manus: Phenomenology of the Encounter*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985. Pp. 230, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. Cloth \$24.95.

*Reviewed by Karen P. Sinclair, Eastern Michigan University*

Lola Romanucci-Ross was part of the New Guinea-Admiralty Islands Expedition (1963-1967), sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History. The expedition --comprised of Theodore Schwartz (to whom she was married at the time), Margaret Mead, and Romanucci-Ross--set out to collect information about the lesser-known islands of this Pacific archipelago. At that time, Mead had already written extensively about Pere village; Ted Schwartz, during previous fieldwork, had made a thorough study of the Paliau movement and its political and religious implications for the Manus. Of the three, only Romanucci-Ross was without prior experience in the area. Twenty years later, Romanucci-Ross has written about that field experience in diarylike form in *Mead's Other Manus*. Apparently uncomfortable with Mead's characterizations of these people, Dr. Romanucci-Ross reexamines Mead's conclusions in light of her own experiences. In turn, she is prompted to reevaluate the entire anthropological enterprise:

For *Mead's Other Manus* I have a dual reference: the first is to those ecological groups in Manus that Mead did not study nor 'see'. She nevertheless described and characterized these groups in terms that her Manus Tru of Pere village used as they 'saw' and talked about them. Secondly, "Mead's Other Manus" are the Manus Tru themselves, still committed to a belief in the wisdom of many facets of their traditional culture (with a proper dash of the Dionysian with which Mead hesitated to endow them) and much more like the rest of the world than those models of "cultural transformation" depicted in their presumed "rapid culture change" in *New Lives For Old*. They pondered,

as I did, the meaning of their presumed "rapid culture change" which Mead had pronounced "painless and irreversible." (xiii)

Romanucci-Ross sets herself some formidable tasks. She has at least three purposes in writing this book. First, her discontent with and distrust of standard ethnographic reporting has led her to examine the nature of the relationship between fieldworker and subject. In so doing, she hopes to explore the processes of discovery and awareness that comprise what she terms "the phenomenology of the encounter." Second, she wants to provide a portrait of the culture acquired during her research on Sori Island, and in Mokerang, Pere, and Lorengau. She has very definite ideas about what should constitute such a description: "a historical dimension; the conscious models of behavior of the culture bearers; structural-functional aspects of the culture (i.e., how events are placed and how the system works); a nomothetic dimension (the search for general laws); and an idiographic dimension (determining how to treat a case that does not fit in with the general laws)" (viii). Third, and finally, she disputes Mead's conclusions. In her view Mead, problem oriented and dogmatic, overstated the success of cultural transformation in the Admiralties. It is little wonder that the book, and the reader, are overloaded. Ironically, one of the major strengths of this book seems to be Romanucci-Ross's recognition that these goals are at times at odds with one another.

She tells us in the foreword that she is experimenting with traditional ethnographic form to overcome the disjuncture between her experience as a fieldworker and her reading as a professional anthropologist: "As I lived among the Manus groups to be presented here, I found it extremely difficult to reconcile what I had read in classical anthropological writings, as well as relevant monographs, with what I myself noted and experienced 'among the primitives'" (vii). Indeed the spurious objectivity of fieldwork, the notion that remote locales and peoples will yield themselves up to the unbiased scrutiny of the Western-trained observer, has all but fallen into disrepute. It would be fair to ask if anyone believed that anymore. In recent years, the nature of anthropological inquiry has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives. Carrier, for example, has recently written:

One aspect of all this has been a debunking, expressed less civilly at some times than at others, of objectivist or positivist anthropology and anthropologists. The idea that a village's society is a neutral, objective reality that the anthropologist is

supposed to observe and describe came to be more and more dubious. Those anthropological ancestors who were thought to have used this method came to be more and more suspect. And their models of objective social or cultural structures came to be more and more disreputable. (1986:521)

Shutz, Berger, Luckman, and Merleau-Ponty provide the intellectual foundations of Romanucci-Ross' work. She argues in the foreword that our understanding of other cultures must not be encumbered by the imposition of a Western, and therefore alien, perspective. She claims: "Our ability to generate knowledge of other cultures has been hampered by the superimposition of the investigator's myths, metaphors, and similes onto the myths and experiences of others" (viii). In this volume her intention is to examine the ways in which she came to know the Manus. The implication appears to be that by presenting a diarylike account of her days and nights in the Admiralties, she will allow us to see the Manus unsullied and uncorrupted by Western preconceptions. This is not to be a standard ethnography. She writes: "In pursuit of the threads of my own coordinates in field research I hope to illuminate the process through which an anthropologist learned about a people and culture, not in a mode known as topical but through the flow of events" (ix). a

The advantages of such an approach are considerable. Participants and observers understand their experiences in very different terms, while individuals within the same society approach daily predicaments, not to mention cosmic uncertainties, with dismaying variety. No matter how much one holds to a belief in cultural pattern, inconsistencies present themselves with alarming frequency in the course of fieldwork. While none of this is exactly novel, a thorough documentation of how one learns another culture would be an important addition to the anthropological literature. Furthermore, Romanucci-Ross is working with a group of people who demonstrate various degrees of familiarity with what has already been written about them. She cannot help but notice that their conceptions of themselves are often at odds with those of the anthropologist's finished product, in this case Mead's. While this quandary does not lend itself to ready resolution, its complexities deserve sophisticated treatment. And here Romanucci-Ross is aided by the fact that several anthropologists have worked among the Manus and that at least one of them, Mead, left meticulous field notes for future comparisons. She has been given, then, a wonderful opportunity to explore a serious epistemological predicament. In a clear and well-writ-

ten volume, Romanucci-Ross presents the reader with a great deal of information. But the real issue is whether she provides, in her analysis and presentation, an effective remedy for the problems besetting the discipline.

If Romanucci-Ross is to describe accurately and completely the nature of her encounter with the Manus, she must provide us with considerably more information about the nature of her position in the field. In a book of this type, her reticence is all the more surprising. While she claims that this is not a book designed to chart inner voyages, there are nevertheless certain external aspects of her situation that elicit comments from the Manus, duly reported, but upon which she remains silent. She tells us next to nothing about her previous experiences with Mead. Yet here Romanucci-Ross is a second wife whose husband, along with his first wife, had already accompanied Mead on a well-publicized expedition. Mead had written extensively about the Manus and was herself a monument in anthropology. Is it possible to believe that none of these considerations had an effect on a young fieldworker? All of the above clearly had an effect on the Manus; their influence could hardly have been unfelt by Romanucci-Ross. Yet Mead's presence is a significant enough factor that more than two decades later, and almost a decade after Mead's death, her name appears in the title.

In *Mead's Other Manus*, we catch brief glimpses of Mead and elliptical looks at the two women together; it is from Mead's letters (see below) that a somewhat more complete portrait of their relationship emerges. Schwartz is gone some or most of the time; it is never clear which. During his absences, she must look after their young son and at times (presumably school holidays) her daughter Deborah, who disconcertingly appears and disappears with little explanation. When Romanucci-Ross burns herself rather badly, she leaves by boat to seek treatment, taking the baby but leaving Deborah. How did the Matanakor react to this (not to mention Deborah)? At one time, the Matanakor are convinced that Schwartz has been lost at sea. How does Romanucci-Ross react to this news and, perhaps more to the point, how do they react to his reappearance? There are far too many of these unanswered questions and unexplored arenas for this book to be considered reflexive in any meaningful way.

Her choice of a diarylike mode of presentation is not entirely successful. To some extent the book provides a chronological accounting of what she accomplished and when. Yet there are significant, unexplained time gaps without entries. More disconcerting, many entries contain technical anthropological information that scarcely belongs in a

field diary, while at the same time this ersatz diary also includes events and material that were published or came to light many years after the ostensible time of the entry. In any event, it is not at all clear how an uncritical detailing of daily events in any way obviates Western bias.

In all she seems to have confounded how we learn with what we learn. Indeed, the real problem of this book is to be found not in its unresolved tension between ethnography and epistemology, but rather in Romanucci-Ross's contradictory position as both a positivist and phenomenologist. Throughout the text and in the appendices there are detailed reckonings of kinship and totemic systems, of court cases and residence patterns. Ultimately, the Manus social system emerges with reality of its own, very much unconstructed by the observer's perceptions. Her chapter headings reflect the intent, rather than the content, of the book.

That Romanucci-Ross has such a positivistic bent ought not to be surprising. She has previously demonstrated her commitment to reliability, accuracy, and validity in the collection and reporting of anthropological materials. Elsewhere, she has written: "There is such a thing as getting more information and more accurate information over a long period of time" (Romanucci-Ross 1983:89). She clearly maintains that the more rigorous the fieldwork, the longer the stay, the more successful the anthropology. Few would take issue with this, especially in light of the recent Mead-Freeman imbroglio. She writes of her Mexican fieldwork: "My 'view' from the first year would have been descriptively incorrect of the culture even though it was true to the time, true to my experience of it, true to the way it was presented to me" (ibid.:89). Unless she underwent a radical change of heart, she should have found writing the present book extraordinarily taxing. Objective truths, those that concede little to experience, can find no place in a phenomenologist's universe. The landscape of the foreword becomes, in the course of the book, besmirched by incongruities that seem to me to be beyond reconciliation. High-flown phenomenological utterances have yielded to incomplete ethnography.

This commingling of raw data and subjective impressions is especially startling given Romanucci-Ross's previous assessment of Mead's methods (1976). Mead, so we learn from Romanucci-Ross, went to great lengths to separate speculation from reporting. At the time, Romanucci-Ross wrote about Mead: "Her main 'method' in research, if we must use the term method, is not to do violence to the reality, or to do as little as possible, and to keep correcting and restudying possible distortion factors" (ibid.:447). Her relationship with Mead, perhaps inevitably,

was very complex. There can be little doubt that Mead's sense of priority (in all ways), her dogmatism, and her opinionated dismissals of things that did not please her (Romanucci-Ross's meticulously assembled field notes were waved away as being too much "like Gregory's" [p. 170]) must have cast a long shadow. Romanucci-Ross is at her most convincing when she demonstrates, which she does quite nicely, that Mead ignored aspects of cargo behavior because they conflicted with her notions of Manus rationality. Similarly, Romanucci-Ross reveals considerably more complexity in her analysis of cultural transformation and retention than was depicted in Mead's *New Lives for Old* (1956). These are the strongest parts of the book; when she compares her conclusions to those of Mead, she is almost always able to produce evidence that makes her deductions more compelling. One cannot help but wonder, then, why she felt called upon to take frequent sideswipes at Mead, when direct attacks are both more professional and, in this case, far more effective.

It is perhaps, as so many defenders of Mead pointed out during the Freeman controversy, important to realize the context in which Mead was writing. Of an occasion when Romanucci-Ross and Schwartz pay her a visit, Mead writes: "During this six weeks, I have been in the village but not of it, for life is not so set up that the people come and go freely as they do when I am working alone. Ted and Lola are working with single informants, taking texts and making tapes, in contexts where a mob of onlookers is a real disadvantage" (1977:275). After reading Romanucci-Ross's introduction and foreword, the reader is left with the impression that she and like-minded individuals have a monopoly on understanding the complexities of the anthropological enterprise. In that light it is that much more surprising to find in Mead's own letters the following:

Uniqueness, now, in a study like this, lies in the relationship between the fieldworker and the material. I still have the responsibility and the incentives that come from the fact that because of my long acquaintance with this village I can perceive and record aspects of this people's life that no one else can. But even so, this knowledge has a new edge. This material will be valuable only if I myself can organize it. In traditional field work, another anthropologist familiar with the area can take over one's notes and make them meaningful. But here it is my individual consciousness which provides the ground on which the lives of these people are figures. (Ibid.: 282-283)

From reading this passage, it is clear that Romanucci-Ross has played down both Mead's understanding and her formidable ego. Had she allowed Mead to emerge, the book would have been considerably more interesting and more honest.

*Mead's Other Manus* provides us with a new view of the Admiralties, one that supplements those already available through the previous work of Schwartz and Mead. Along the way, Romanucci-Ross has chosen to tackle some very difficult problems in contemporary anthropology. That she is not always successful should deter neither future investigators nor present readers of this book.

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