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# The History of Samoan Sexual Conduct and the Mead-Freeman Controversy

THE MEAD-FREEMAN CONTROVERSY over the nature of Samoan culture, and especially Samoan sexual conduct, has provoked popular and professional commentary for more than a decade. One reason the controversy has been so engaging is that many of the issues are not specific to Samoa but rather involve broader questions of context, rhetoric, ideology, and ethnographic authority. For anthropologists who work in other parts of the world, these general issues concerning the politics of representation have been as significant as factual issues concerning what Samoan culture was really like. For example:

- Richard Shweder, in a piece on storytelling in anthropology, argues that for Mead's audience in the 1920s, it did not matter whether Samoa was in fact a sexually permissive society because somewhere in the world there was undoubtedly a place as permissive as the islands Mead had described (1986:39).<sup>1</sup> For Mead's readers, the "mere possibility" of the existence of such a place was liberating, even if Samoa was not that place.
- In his perceptive analysis of the rhetoric of *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, Mac Marshall (1993) notes that Freeman's use of language gives authority to his position while undermining Mead's. Yet in reminding readers that there is more to the controversy than the simple reporting of objective facts, Marshall defers judgment on who is right and who is wrong (1993:605; see also Feinberg 1988:662).
- George Marcus considers Freeman's book a public nuisance, causing "great mischief" (1983:3) and having an implicit ideological agenda. But while Marcus is uneasy about Freeman's argument, it is not neces-

sarily because his facts are wrong. It is rather because his interpretation is unbalanced and one-sided.

- In a similar vein, Nancy Scheper-Hughes contends that Mead and Freeman each wrote about one dimension of Samoan culture. Each had access to *a* truth, but not *the* truth, about the islanders. And "this difference can be explained by the differences between Mead and Freeman and their respective informants" (1984:90).

Although these commentaries raise important points that help to frame the controversy, they are primarily about issues that are generic to ethnography and could pertain to any number of places in the world. And herein lies a problem. Many anthropologists who have worked in other parts of the world, including other parts of the South Pacific, have disagreed with Freeman's critique of Mead in terms of the politics of representation. Yet they often concede that Freeman's factual presentation of Samoan culture and history is meticulous, convincing, and apparently accurate. Relatively few reviewers of Freeman's argument have raised the possibility that substantial portions of his factual portrayal of Samoa may be inaccurate.

After the initial stages of the controversy in which Samoa was directly discussed, Freeman could still say that, to the best of his knowledge, "no significant element of the empirical evidence on which my refutation is based has been shown to be unfactual" (1985:911–912). Freeman's seeming certainty about factual accuracy has, in part, led critics to focus on other issues. Yet the persuasiveness of Freeman's refutation of Mead ultimately rests on the assumption that his characterization of Samoa is supported by the sources he cites and the data he uses. The controversy is thus necessarily about the nature of Samoan culture and history.

This article examines one crucial aspect of Freeman's portrayal of the islands—his history of sexual

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conduct in Samoa and, in particular, the *taupou* system. This history is embedded in his refutation of Mead but can, for present purposes, be viewed as a reconstruction in its own right. Freeman argues that the *taupou* system, or system of institutionalized virginity, was a key to understanding Samoan sexual conduct. In combination with a strict Christian morality, the values of the *taupou* system governed Samoan sexual conduct during most of the colonial period, from the mid-19th century through the 1950s. The emphasis on virginity was part of a "prudish Christian society" (Freeman 1983c:238) that did not substantially change until overseas migration, commencing in the 1950s, began to erode Samoan values. There was thus almost a century of sexual restrictiveness in Samoa. Freeman contends that the historical data not only support his argument but demonstrate that, prior to, during, and after the time of Mead's work in Samoa in the 1920s, Samoan sexual conduct continued to be restrictive and was never permissive, despite her assertions to the contrary.

How well is Freeman's history of Samoan sexual conduct supported by the evidence? As we shall see, not very well. There are major problems with Freeman's reconstruction. Historically, Samoa was less restrictive than Freeman allows, and there was more variability in sexual conduct than Freeman discerns. This can be shown by a review of the traditional *taupou* system and its subsequent modification from the mid-19th century through the 1950s, a long interval of cultural stability, according to Freeman. Especially important is the period of World War II, when Freeman did his own first fieldwork in the islands. The sources used here are primarily those employed by Freeman himself in his critique of Mead, but Freeman often omits passages from these sources that do not support his position. Since Freeman's critique of Mead is, to a significant degree, a historical critique based on these sources, a reexamination of them is essential to validating the empirical basis of Freeman's account. Let us begin by considering Freeman's argument more fully.

### The Taupou System as Presented in Freeman's Argument

The *taupou* system and the value of virginity to Samoans are among the most important issues in the Mead-Freeman controversy. According to Freeman, the *taupou*, or "ceremonial virgin," was one of the "most sacrosanct traditional institutions" (1983c:253). In pre-European times, female virginity was "very much the leitmotif of the pagan Samoans" (1983c:232) and even today "the sexual mores of the pagan Samoans are still, in many ways, extant" (1983c:236). A *taupou*, usually the daughter of a high-ranking chief, was required to

demonstrate her chastity in a public defloration ceremony just prior to her formal arranged marriage. Freeman states that the value of virginity embodied in the *taupou* extended beyond these maidens to virtually all adolescent girls (1983c:236). In the postcontact era, Christianity transformed and reinforced the values of the *taupou* system so that, in Freeman's view, "after the mid nineteenth century, when a puritanical Christian morality was added to an existing traditional cult of virginity, Samoa became a society in which chastity was, in Shore's words, 'the ideal for all women before marriage,' and in which this religiously and culturally sanctioned ideal strongly influenced the actual behavior of adolescent girls" (1983c:239).

Freeman's extensive discussion of the *taupou* system is intended to provide a refutation of Margaret Mead's portrait of the *taupou* as a girl of high rank whose virginity was closely guarded, but who was the exception rather than the cultural rule in terms of virginity. Mead argued that, apart from the *taupou* and other daughters of chiefs, Samoan adolescent girls could and did engage in clandestine premarital sex. Instead of Christianity reinforcing a preexisting ideal of chastity, as Freeman would have it, for Mead, Christianity and colonial government led to a relaxation of the severe traditional standards for the *taupou*, in part by banning the defloration ceremony (1928:274). Mead even argued that the hymenal blood of the virgin, traditionally displayed at the defloration ceremony, could be counterfeited with chicken's blood, a point that Freeman adamantly rejects. Apart from the virginity of the *taupou* to which Samoans were already committed, Mead stated, they were skeptical of Christianity's message about chastity and participated in what, by American standards of the 1920s, were permissive premarital relationships.

While Mead and Freeman agree on the importance of virginity for the *taupou*, they disagree on virtually everything else—how widely virginity was valued, the role of Christianity, and the actual behavior of Samoan adolescent girls. Because Samoa has a reputation for tradition and continuity, Freeman's depiction of the *taupou* system lends itself to an interpretation involving cultural conservatism and resiliency. Mead's depiction, on the other hand, suggests that the post-European *taupou* system became attenuated as a result of colonialism. These opposed characterizations raise a number of historical questions. How persistent was the *taupou* system after European settlement began? What kinds of changes occurred? And how closely has the ideal of chastity been observed at different times and in different contexts during the colonial period?

Freeman does not deny that changes in the *taupou* system occurred. He states, "With the interdicting of public defloration by Christian missionaries, the *taupou*

of pagan Samoa underwent major changes" (1983c:237). Yet the value of virginity for all girls remained. Chastity was now guarded by the village pastor in whose home adolescent girls slept at night (1983c:237). The village enforced a system of punishments on young men caught seducing taupou. Young women behaving improperly were also punished, often with beatings by family members.

Freeman finds that only in recent decades have the strict standards that were in force for a century begun to change as a result of external influences:

Although the ideal of chastity for women before marriage is still of great importance in Samoa, changes in sexual mores have occurred and are still occurring following the large-scale migration, from the 1950s onward, of American Samoans to the United States and of Western Samoans to New Zealand, which has led to acquaintance with the sexual permissiveness of Western societies. Some of these migrants have returned, and in consequence, sexual behavior has, since the 1960s, begun to depart from the traditional system. [1983c:350 ff.]

Thus, according to Freeman, prior to migration, from the mid-19th century through the 1950s, there was considerable continuity in the "puritanical Christian sexual morality" (1983c:239) and the actual virginity of young women.

### The Ideal of Chastity in Freeman's Argument

Freeman's emphasis on the enduring value of virginity is important at the level of public ideology. But this ideology was not monolithic and did not apply equally to all segments of Samoan society. In his own work, Freeman demonstrates that for young men there was a double standard. Adolescent males were permitted and encouraged to engage in premarital sex while at the same time protecting their sisters from potential suitors. Freeman states that young men were preoccupied with the taking of virginity (1983c:245). Success in deflowering virgins was not only "deemed a personal triumph" but also a "demonstration of masculinity" (1983c:245). Young men kept count of their conquests and bragged of them (1983c:236). As Freeman notes, "young men are greatly given to boasting about having deflowered a virgin" (1983c:234), and they felt shame if they were unsuccessful (1983c:236). Moreover, the *manaia*, or high-ranking leader of the unmarried men of a village, was "expected to be something of a Don Juan," and gained prestige by successfully seducing a succession of taupou without marrying them (Freeman 1983b:161, 1983c:234 ff.). Even perpetrators of the serious crime of surreptitious rape could "gain acclaim" from their peers if successful, according to Freeman (1983b:125).

For young women, however, expectations about virginity were quite different. High-ranking young women were expected to be chaste, and punishments for transgressions could be severe. If young men were shamed by their peers for failure in seduction, young women were publicly shamed if they were seduced (Freeman 1983c:23). Yet this was not the case for all young women. According to Freeman, the ideal of virginity applied "less stringently to women of lower rank" (Freeman 1983c:236).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Freeman himself documents multiple and conflicting values concerning virginity for both young men and women.

Freeman's emphasis on the ideology of virginity is also misleading when it comes to the explanation of actual *behavior*. For example, Freeman quotes Bradd Shore as stating that chastity was "the ideal of all women before marriage" (Freeman 1983c:239), and indeed, Shore does discuss this public ideal, recognizing its symbolic importance for Samoans. But he also states, in passages that Freeman does not cite, that the ideal of virginity is frequently unrealized and that premarital sex, carefully hidden from public view, is "not uncommon" (Shore 1982:229-230). In an earlier piece, Shore found that "premarital sex is part of growing up for many Samoan boys and girls. . . . Privately, at least, many Samoan youth see sex as an important part of youthful adventure" (1981:197).

A review of the recent ethnographic literature on Samoa from the 1960s through the present, including Freeman's own data, confirms the existence of a restrictive public morality concerning sexual conduct and sexual restrictions on girls and young women. It also acknowledges that private sexual activity occurs, although ethnographers disagree on the extent of the activity.<sup>3</sup> Freeman's view of Samoan sexual activity is more limited than that of other observers, with Freeman himself stating that in Samoa, "the cult of virginity is probably carried to a greater extreme than any other culture known to anthropology" (1983c:250). However, his own data on adolescent sexual activity do not support this claim.

Freeman readily affirms the existence of premarital intercourse in Samoa. Referring to the virginity of female adolescents, Freeman notes that in a rural Western Samoan village he studied, about 20 percent of 15-year-olds, about 30 percent of 16-year-olds, and almost 40 percent of 17-year-olds had engaged in premarital intercourse (1983b:124, 1983c:238-240). For Freeman, these percentages are not "inconsiderable," but he views them as "deviations" (1983a:7) or "departures" (1983b:124) from a strict public morality. These deviations, according to Freeman, are also viewed by Samoans as illicit and, if detected, are subject to social disapproval and punishment (1983b:124).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, they are surprisingly common.

When Freeman's data are compared with the limited statistical data available on premarital sex among American adolescent girls in the early 20th century—which was Mead's point of reference—Freeman's adolescent girls seem to have been more sexually active than American adolescent girls in the early 1900s (Seidman 1991:122). Moreover, using more reliable data on female adolescent virginity in America from the 1930s through the mid-1970s, Freeman's 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old Samoan girls were somewhat more sexually active than their American counterparts from these decades (Hofferth et al. 1987:48).<sup>5</sup> In terms of behavior, then, comparative data indicate that even at the beginning of America's sexual revolution in the 1960s and early 1970s, the young Samoan adolescent girls studied by Freeman were more likely to be sexually active than their American counterparts. Although such comparisons are imperfect, they do cast doubt on Freeman's assertion that Samoans probably value virginity more than any other culture known to anthropology. Schlegel's broader cross-cultural study of the value of virginity (1991) also does not support Freeman's position on Samoan virginity. She finds Samoa to be somewhere in the middle between the most restrictive and most permissive societies.

As interesting as these contemporary data are in terms of intracultural and cross-cultural variation in ideology and behavior, the *historical* data from Samoa are more significant, because Freeman's critique is primarily a historical critique.<sup>6</sup> And, as we shall see, the historical data on Samoan sexual conduct from the 1830s through the 1950s, which are Freeman's focus, do not support major portions of his argument. Let us now turn to the taupou system as it was observed at the time of first contact.

## The Traditional Taupou System

The traditional taupou system was part of a complex pre-European political order involving competing chiefs.<sup>7</sup> In Samoa, chieftainships combined achievement and ascription, placing greater emphasis on achievement than the more stratified islands of Hawaii and Tahiti. Samoa was a more "open" system with an intense rivalry and competition for high-ranking titles in a political environment of shifting alliances and warfare. Each village had its own hierarchy of chiefs, organized as a council, which was integrated into a larger, supralocal hierarchy. In addition, each village had an organization of untitled men (*'aumaga*) and an organization primarily of unmarried women and girls (*auluma*). As part of this system, a titular chief would appoint one of his daughters, or perhaps another female family member, to the position of taupou. She was a

virgin, usually an adolescent, and her high status articulated with but was separate from the Samoan prerogatives of rank typically held by older married men.

A taupou was ceremonially installed by the male political hierarchy of a village. Although not a chief herself, the taupou took part in the ceremonial protocol of the council of chiefs, making kava for them. The kava ritual opened Samoan ceremonial occasions and affirmed the rank of the chiefly participants. The taupou played a major role in village entertainment, including dances, and was responsible for entertaining visiting groups from other villages. As a member of such intervillage traveling parties herself, the taupou was given a special position. In her own village, she was the leader of the *auluma* and was recognized by the *'aumaga* as the village's outstanding maiden. In addition, the taupou was nurtured by the wives of chiefs and was closely chaperoned and guarded by both older women and girls, as well as by her family.

Unlike her own sisters and other girls of her generation, the taupou did not engage in hard labor and was given the best foods and provided with special dress and adornment. The taupou's formal marriage to a high title holder or aspiring title holder after a public courtship could cement an important political alliance. Such alliances were vital to advancing the rank of chiefs. The marriage of a taupou also involved the transmission of substantial amounts of wealth. Therefore it was important that the taupou not be seduced, although she was the object of desire by many eligible men, and that she not elope (*avaga*), although elopement was a publicly recognized form of marriage for Samoans of lesser rank.

The taupou's public defloration, performed manually by the groom, using a white cloth to demonstrate chastity, reflected the stakes in an alliance as well as the prestige of the village and her family. If the taupou was not a virgin, she would be harshly punished by her own family and publicly shamed; there was also the possibility of being beaten to death. In any case, the marriage would be terminated. On the other hand, a successful marriage was the end of her career as taupou, and a new taupou would be appointed. Polygynous chiefs could take additional wives, including other taupou, and a chief's earlier marriages were often dissolved. If so, the former taupou returned to her natal village never to marry again.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the majority of girls were not taupou, and the well-traveled John Williams of the London Missionary Society believed that the Samoans he encountered in the 1830s were more like permissive Tahitians than restrictive Tongans in terms of their "lascivious habits" (1984:233). Williams, who provided the first "comprehensive and detailed information" on the Samoans (Freeman 1983c:114), described how non-taupou en-

joyed "a roving commission" in sexual matters before marriage (Williams 1984:233). Côté's review of Williams's journals (1994:74–79) suggests that, as important as the virginity of the taupou was, her behavior was not followed by many other girls. Thus, Williams's description of the pre-European taupou system indicates that the ideal of virginity did not lead to uniform conduct among unmarried females.

### The Changing Taupou System: The 1830s to 1900

Although the Samoan archipelago was first visited by Europeans in 1722, missionization did not really begin until 1830, when Williams and his associates began converting Samoans. Williams himself thought that there would be great difficulty evangelizing Samoans given the status of women and the nature of Samoan polygyny (1984:283). Nevertheless, within two to three decades, Samoans had converted to Christianity in impressive numbers (Daws 1961; Tiffany 1978). The process of conversion was so swift and seemingly complete that it is sometimes mistaken for wholesale acceptance of missionary efforts and a felicitous blending of two cultures. Freeman, for example, speaks of the merger between "the cult of virginity" and a puritanical Christian morality reinforcing the value of chastity for the taupou and other adolescent girls (1983c:239). In reality, however, as in other areas of the Pacific, the two cultures were often at odds, if not in open conflict, over a number of matters, especially sexual conduct.

Early missionaries reported on the taupou system and other matters of concern to them. Many traditional practices, particularly the public defloration ceremony, shocked them and were forbidden. As historian Richard Gilson notes, in the mid-19th century:

The missions gave top billing to sex and family relations . . . the abolition of polygamy and, in most cases, divorce; the celebration of monogamous marriages in church; the prohibition of certain customary marriage rights, including the exchange of goods and the public test of virginity; the prevention of political marriages and of marriages between Christians and non-Christians; the prohibition of adultery, fornication and prostitution [the English meanings of these terms are intended]; the prohibition of obscenity in words and action; the imposition of new standards of dress, including 'full coverage' for women. [1970:96]

J. W. Davidson offers additional discussion of the problems encountered by the missionaries of the mid-1800s:

The reformulation of conduct was seen, primarily, as the changing of attitudes towards sex and the exercise of authority. Samoan acceptance of polygamy, of extra-marital intercourse, and of easy divorce, was inevitably regarded with horror, as were the performance of 'lewd'

songs and dances and the public testing of virginity at marriage. But the missionaries sensed incompatibility with Christianity, as they understood it, in much else besides: in the practice of tattooing, in the wearing of their hair long by the men and short by the women, in the scantiness of Samoan dress, and in the lack of privacy provided by Samoan houses. In all these matters, and much more besides, they strove to impose their own standards. [1967:35]

The initial impression of a number of early Christian missionaries was that Samoa was a pagan culture filled with godlessness and immorality and in need of substantial reform. Although Samoans were considered a "race" worthy of Christianity and superior to other non-Western cultures, the missionaries' graphic descriptions of "low blackguard" dances, ease of sexual access in living arrangements, and sexual exchanges during intervillage visits left them with little doubt about imposing their own rigorous standards of conduct on these "savages." They did not encounter a culture universally committed to chastity for all men and women, but rather a culture in which sexual activities were common enough to receive the missionaries' greatest attention. Thus, while approving of the ideal of virginity as symbolically represented by the taupou, missionaries did not approve of many aspects of the taupou system and Samoan sexual conduct, firmly condemning political marriages, polygyny, concubinage, adultery, fornication, and, of course, public defloration. They also wished to eliminate the aualuma (Roach 1984:230). Furthermore, the Samoans, while accepting many parts of Christianity, at least superficially, openly resisted and rejected other parts, influencing Christianity just as they were influenced by it. Some chiefs openly defied missionaries by engaging in political marriages and public acts of "immorality" (Gilson 1970:119).

Despite missionary teachings, allegedly immoral practices continued among large segments of the population, leading to expressions of frustration by the clergy. The virginity of non-taupou remained problematic. For example, George Turner, a Wesleyan missionary who began working in Samoa in 1841 and whose writings Freeman finds "particularly valuable" (1983c:114), wrote:

Chastity was ostensibly cultivated by both sexes; but it was more a name than a reality. . . . There were exceptions, especially among the daughters of persons of rank; but they were the exceptions, not the rule. [1888:184]

Beyond banning the public defloration ceremony and condemning other forms of alleged immorality, the missionaries also discouraged a variety of activities that had supported the taupou system as an institution. Lascivious "night dances" were prohibited, and even mild *siva* dancing was forbidden, to be replaced by church

going and hymn singing. Although these prohibitions were later relaxed, they undermined the responsibilities of the *taupou* and *aualuma* in public entertainment. Even kava drinking, thought to be a form of intoxication, was banned for a time, and this too eroded the role of the *taupou*.

More importantly, the abolition of polygynous marriages created a surplus of candidates for the position of *taupou*. In pre-European Samoa, high-ranking chiefs might have up to a dozen wives, leading to a high turnover of *taupou*. But with Christian insistence on monogamy, the earlier utility of *taupou* marriages was altered. By the end of the 19th century, strategic political alliances secured by the marriage of *taupou* were no longer as important. Although still a hostess, dancer, political representative, and performer, the *taupou* had fewer responsibilities than in pre-European Samoa, and the *aualuma* became less influential.

Under these changed conditions, the virginity of the *taupou* herself was no longer as valuable in practice as in the idealized public morality. Many *taupou* were not waiting for formal marriage with the accompanying gift exchange but rather eloping for short periods of time. While elopement was a common practice and customary form of marriage for nonchiefly families, for *taupou* from chiefly families it had been both scandalous and dangerous. Nevertheless, by the 1890s, in many areas *taupou* were eloping in order to have more choice in their marriage partners.

A candid discussion of this trend comes from the turn-of-the-century German observer Augustin Krämer, whose work is often cited with justifiably high regard by Freeman. Krämer, in an extended footnote, notes that the defloration ceremony was being abandoned by the turn of the 20th century, not so much because of church prohibition but because *taupou* were eloping:

Although [there was] a public defloration in 1897 near Apia, the custom may now be regarded as virtually extinct. Unfortunately, the reasons lie less in the influence of the church, rather much more in the impossibility [of proving virginity] on the part of the maidens. Virtually all of the *taupou* whom I asked would give me the names of the *manaia* [village "princes" or heirs apparent] with whom they ran away in order to give an advantage toward marrying each other; but most of them returned [home] after three days. [1902:36]<sup>9</sup>

Thus, decades before either Mead or Freeman did fieldwork in the islands, the role of the *taupou* as well as her actual behavior had changed a good deal. The ideal of chastity remained, but the institution itself had been modified.

## Samoan Sexual Conduct: 1900 through the 1950s

In the early 20th century, changes in the *taupou* system already mentioned were apparent to Felix Keesing, an anthropologist who worked in Samoa shortly after Mead and before Freeman. His 1937 article, "The *Taupou* [*sic*] System of Samoa: A Study of Institutional Change," provides a review and discussion of the system during precontact and colonial periods. On the basis of fieldwork in the late 1920s, Keesing found that monogamy no longer favored selection of many *taupou*. He noted:

In the old days a fresh *taupou* would be married off probably every two to four years. Since the number of very high-born chiefs and chiefs-elect suitable for such matches was limited, the new monogamous marriage system brought what might be called a glut in the *taupou* marriage mart: many maidens but few available husbands of suitable rank. [1937:7]

As a result, fewer *taupou* were appointed. Keesing continues:

What then of the *taupou* institution in the modern era of mission work, commercial development, schools, and Western political control?

The visitor to present day Samoa passes through village after village without encountering a full-fledged *taupou*. From the writer's own enquiries and experience of travel, he would judge that the great majority of chiefs entitled to maintain a *taupou* no longer do so. Even where a *taupou* is found, as in socially conservative areas like Manu'a [where Mead worked], and in the case of very high chiefs like Malietoa and Mataafa, her activities have become attenuated. [1937:5]

Keesing's observations are supported by the work of F. J. H. Grattan, a public servant with a diploma in anthropology from Cambridge who worked in Western Samoa for many years, beginning in 1929. He speaks of the *taupou* system as being in a state of "practical decay," having lost its former importance (1948:152). Lowell Holmes, whose fieldwork in Manu'a began in 1954, comes to a similar conclusion. By the 1950s both the *taupou* and the *aualuma* were quite different institutions from what they had been traditionally (Holmes and Holmes 1992:42). While virginity was still publicly valued, premarital sexual relationships occurred, as did some births out of wedlock.

Some of the most credible reporting on actual relationships between Samoan adolescents comes from author Fay Calkins, who married a Samoan and resided in a Western Samoan village during the 1950s. Freeman cites Calkins as disagreeing with Mead on Samoan adolescence (1983c:259). Yet while Calkins does disagree with Mead about the absence of storm and stress in Samoan adolescence, and although she chronicles the

surveillance of Samoan girls as a means of preserving virginity and decorum, Calkins spends an entire chapter of *My Samoan Chief* (1962:112–122) describing a number of covert affairs, including those that occurred during intervillage visits. For girls of lesser rank, these affairs caused few problems; for those of higher rank the consequences were more severe. Calkins leaves little doubt that these relationships, however problematic, were fairly common.<sup>10</sup>

## Interethnic Relationships during World War II

By the 1950s the role of the taupou had been transformed from an essential component of a traditional political and economic system to a less significant, in certain circumstances even optional, part of a changing culture. Nevertheless, Freeman argues that there was “general stability of Samoan culture in the first half of the 20th century” (1985:914), including sexual conduct. But what of World War II?

The arrival of the war in the early 1940s brought some of the most far-reaching changes to Samoa since colonization (Field 1984:219). Although the islands themselves, with the exception of one Japanese submarine attack, were never the site of military action, they garrisoned tens of thousands of troops. Both American Samoa and Western Samoa had major bases. Anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner, a postwar observer, described the situation as follows:

Before the main body of troops moved to forward areas in 1943–44 there may have been as many as 25,000 or 30,000 troops in Western Samoa at any one time. The turnover, of course, was much higher because of transfer of units and movement of reinforcements. The troops were dispersed throughout the islands, many defended zones were constructed, and there was an enormous temporary building programme. The troops concentrated in camps or bivouacs along the coastline, in the main areas of native settlement, so that segregation was impracticable. . . . The Samoan islands experienced immensely heightened activity, intimate contact with Europeans *en masse*, and economic “prosperity,” all in a degree greater than in any previous period in their history. [1953:325–326]<sup>11</sup>

The military needed Samoan labor and Samoan products; Samoans also quickly became effective small traders, restaurant and café owners, and brewers of crude but potent spirits, leading to increases in Samoan income. In terms of Samoan culture, “Some native ceremonies were cheapened, and in cases debauched, to attract gift-bearing Americans. A few *matai* [chiefs] appointed new *taupo* virgins, as often as not girls lacking the technical attributes, to assist hospitalities” (Stanner 1953:326).

American men and Samoan women quickly developed intimate personal relationships, usually with pa-

rental approval. In his recent autobiography, James Michener (1992) reports in a discrete but detailed manner his own participation in this practice. As a lieutenant, Michener was responsible for base security. Early in his Western Samoan tour, he found a base where, during the day, 60 to 72 American men were on duty, whereas at night there were only six. Concerned about security, Michener learned that military vehicles took the men to villages at dusk, where they were dropped off to rendezvous with their Samoan girlfriends for the evening. Michener saw firsthand that these evening arrangements were openly welcomed by the Samoans. In the morning, servicemen were picked up and returned to base. Michener himself was invited by a high-ranking Samoan chief to enter into such a relationship with his daughter and father her child (1992:38–40). As a result of his involvement, Michener felt so compromised that he never reported these relationships to his superior officers.<sup>12</sup>

How widespread were these wartime relationships? Stanner offers a frank evaluation:

A great deal of sexual promiscuity occurred between Samoan or part-Samoan women and American troops. Responsible Samoans said that actual prostitution was restricted to a very small group of women. Romantic, at least friendly, relationships were very common. One mission society reported that in Upolu alone there were 1,200 known instances of illegitimate children by American soldiers from Samoan girls. The official statistics were not revealed, but put the number of known illegitimate children very much lower. Only a few incidents were caused by the jealousy of Samoan men, and not much was made of them by either side. Some villages were said to have set up a special curfew for their girls, and at Falefa (near Apia) no troops except officers on business were allowed to enter *fale* [houses]. With troops so widely dispersed in an area so densely settled it is impossible to prevent familiar association. Many soldiers regularly visited girl-friends within the villages, by no means only with single intention, but the entrance-gates to the airport, it was said, became known among Samoans as “the gates of sin.” At least one *matai* [chief] was summarily expelled from his church congregation and from the society of the village on suspicion of procuring girls for prostitution. [1953:327]

These accounts of wartime Samoa suggest that interethnic relationships were common, although many villages away from bases and roads had little contact with foreign troops. In areas where relationships took place, young women were allowed and even encouraged by their families to enter into these relationships, with contact to a large degree under the control of parents and the village. There were also relatively few overt conflicts between families and American troops in Western Samoa. This pattern of sexual conduct is very difficult to reconcile with Freeman’s portrait of a “severe Christian morality” (1983b:121) and a culture in



which virginity was probably carried to a greater extreme than in any other society known to anthropology. It is also at odds with Freeman's assertion that major changes in restrictive Samoan sexual conduct did not begin to occur until the 1950s.

Because the Allied occupation of Western Samoa began in 1942, perhaps the best opportunity to view these changes would have been during an interval shortly before 1942 and immediately thereafter. Derek Freeman arrived in Western Samoa in April 1940 as a school teacher, departing in November 1943. He was therefore in a position to have observed or at least known of these interethnic relationships. As a New Zealander whose country was the governing power in Western Samoa at that time, Freeman served in the Local Defense Force himself. He went on to serve in the Royal New Zealand Volunteer Naval Reserve for the rest of the war, landing ships in Europe and the Far East (Appell and Madan 1988:5). Yet the war and its effects on Samoa, including interethnic relationships, are not discussed in *Margaret Mead and Samoa*.<sup>13</sup> Instead Freeman emphasizes how little the culture had changed and how much continuity there was, even through the 1960s (1983b:118).

### Freeman's Use of Historical Evidence

Freeman writes that he knew that his refutation of Mead's Samoan findings "would involve much research into the history of early Samoa" (1983c:xiv). As a result of this research, he criticizes Margaret Mead not only for her characterization of Samoan culture, which he believes is "fundamentally in error," but also for her failure to historically contextualize Samoa prior to and during the 1920s and for her failure to use such important 19th-century authorities on Samoa as Turner, Krämer, and Pritchard, whose accounts, according to Freeman, were markedly at variance with Mead's.<sup>14</sup> Freeman also faults Franz Boas, Mead's mentor, for not reading these same authorities (1983c:291) and thus becoming aware of Mead's errors.

Whatever Mead's shortcomings, it is now apparent that Freeman's own history of sexual conduct in Samoa is open to criticism and that his argument is not well supported by many of the very sources that he uses to criticize Mead. Freeman's reading of the literature on Samoan sexual conduct is selective, and he omits passages that are not in accord with his restrictive characterization of Samoan sexual conduct. He could have cited relevant sections of Williams on the sexual conduct of non-taupou in the 1830s, Turner on how the Samoan ideal of virginity was often unrealized among non-taupou, Krämer on the elopement of taupou in the 1890s, Stanner on interethnic relationships during

World War II, and Calkins on affairs among Samoan adolescents in the 1950s. Freeman uses each of these sources, giving the impression of thorough coverage, but he omits those sections that could lead to modification, revision, or even rejection of portions of his own argument and that might lend credibility to Mead's.

This selectivity in Freeman's documentation can be illustrated by an example that Freeman believes is fatal to Mead's credibility as a reliable authority on Samoan custom. At the end of his chapter "Sexual Mores and Behavior," Freeman criticizes Mead for what he believes is her ultimate misrepresentation of Samoan custom: the alleged substitution of animal blood for hymenal blood during the public defloration of the taupou. Mead believed that a taupou's virginity could be counterfeited by substituting chicken's blood and that it was thus possible for a nonvirgin taupou to escape punishment and consummate a marriage.

Although Mead's argument did not appear in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, it is mentioned in *Social Organization of Manu'a* (1930:96), and Freeman finds it "baseless" (1983c:252) for a number of reasons:

- Given the value of virginity, a counterfeited defloration would allow male rivals of the groom to claim sexual connection with the taupou, thereby undermining a chief's prestige.
- In 1967, Freeman asked the chiefs of Manu'a about the possibility of faking a defloration, and they indignantly rejected Mead's account.
- According to Mead's own writings, she learned of the practice of substitution of animal blood in New Guinea in 1929, after her Samoan fieldwork, from Phoebe Parkinson, a half-caste Samoan who had left the islands about 50 years earlier.

Freeman therefore concludes that Mead's notions about faking virginity were the result of "an outlandish tale" told by an unreliable informant to a young anthropologist seeking a way to minimize the importance of the taupou's virginity, thus "completely misrepresenting the attitude of the dignified and punctilious Samoans towards one of their most sacrosanct traditional institutions. It is difficult to imagine a greater travesty than this of the fa'aSamoa [Samoan custom]" (1983c:253).

Did Mead fabricate and then embroider her account as Freeman suggests? Or is there some historical basis to her argument? Freeman's logic seems impeccable, and his critique is devastating. But Lowell Holmes confirmed Mead's account of counterfeiting virginity based on his work in Manu'a in the 1950s (1958:53). Freeman dismisses this version because Holmes states that a chicken bladder full of blood was used, and chickens do not have bladders (1983c:353 ff.). Aletta

Lewis (1938:252), who visited Manu'a shortly after Mead, also wrote of the substitution of animal blood.<sup>15</sup> Although Freeman does not directly address Lewis's account, he does note that the association of pig's blood with anyone of rank is "the heaviest of insults, and the use of pig's blood in substitution for that of a high-ranking *taupou* at her ceremonial defloration, being both insulting and sacrilegious, would at all costs be avoided" (1983c:251).

There is one account, though, that is more difficult to dismiss: that of Augustin Krämer, whose work Freeman and indeed virtually all scholars of Samoa hold in high regard. In a passage quoted earlier, Krämer found that in the 1890s the public defloration ceremony, at least in many areas, had become virtually extinct, in large part because the *taupou* themselves were eloping so often that few true virgins remained. Krämer continues:

For a public defloration now, either the maiden is still very young, or the old women resort to other means like *chicken blood*, shark's teeth and so forth. [1902:36; emphasis added]

While Freeman quotes Krämer as stating that proof of a bride's virginity was "indispensable" (1983c:232), he does not mention this passage about the counterfeiting of virginity.

Krämer himself did not approve of public defloration; nevertheless he found these means of counterfeiting hymenal blood to be morally deplorable. He states:

Naturally without wanting to say that the custom of public defloration must be maintained, one must however reproach the missionaries who have not been able to offer an alternative [custom] to the people. . . . In any case, also in this respect, the 'old Samoa' is finished. [1902:36]

Krämer thus refers to the counterfeiting of virginity with chicken's blood in the context of a disappearing practice. He appears to be criticizing the ends to which Samoans would go to preserve the spirit, though not the letter, of chastity.

Given Krämer's extensive knowledge of the islands and his well-deserved reputation as a scholar, his account cannot be ignored. It is possible that Krämer is incorrect; it is also possible that he is correct. A definitive answer cannot be given at this time. However, since Krämer is often cited by Freeman in support of his critique of Mead, Freeman's omission of this relevant passage is striking. It may be that Freeman's most stinging rebuttal of Mead's work on Samoan sexual conduct is in need of revision.

## Conclusion

We have traced the history of sexual conduct in Samoa, from the mid-19th century through the 1950s,

in order to examine Freeman's assertions about the historical continuity of sexual restrictiveness, the value of virginity for all girls, and the roles of the *taupou* system and the church in preserving chastity. A rereading of much of the historical literature that Freeman employs in his critique of Mead does not support substantial portions of Freeman's history of sexual conduct.

It seems clear that the *taupou* system as an institutional complex attenuated considerably from the 1830s through the 1950s. Although the publicly expressed value of chastity remained important, by the end of the 19th century a number of *taupou* were eloping. Among the broader population of Samoan adolescent girls, virginity was of lesser value than for the *taupou*.

By the early 20th century, fewer *taupou* were appointed; as an institution, the *taupou* system was in decay. During World War II, interethnic relationships between American servicemen and Samoan women occurred that are dramatically at variance with Freeman's assertions about a prudish, puritanical society that places a greater emphasis on virginity than perhaps any other known to anthropology. Ethnographic data from the 1950s also do not support Freeman's argument about extreme sexual restrictiveness. The ideological value of virginity and the restrictiveness of the church cannot explain, by themselves, the historical variability in actual behavior and the changes that occurred from the mid-19th century through the 1950s.

Most of the sources used in this reanalysis were used by Freeman to support his historical argument. However, Freeman has neglected significant passages in source after source. Especially puzzling is the absence of discussion of World War II, a time during which Freeman himself was in the islands and during which there were many interethnic relationships between American servicemen and Samoan women outside of marriage and with parental approval. Yet it was at this very time in 1943, when premarital sexual activity was perhaps most apparent, that Freeman says he realized that he would "one day have to face the responsibility of writing a refutation of Mead's Samoan findings" (1983c:xiv).

Freeman states that his sense of responsibility to the historical record delayed the completion of his refutation until 1981, when he finally gained access to the Archives of the High Court of American Samoa for the 1920s (1983c:xvi). After this he was able to put the concluding touches on a manuscript that he first drafted in 1978. Freeman says, "If I had not systematically completed my researches in the way that I have described, my refutation would certainly not have the cogency that it does" (1983b:112). Yet without a discussion of significant passages that were already available

in published sources cited by Freeman, his refutation of Mead is less persuasive than it first appeared.

Freeman also remarks that his refutation "is based on most carefully researched evidence, meticulously checked by native scholars, of a kind that could be submitted to a congressional or royal commission" (1985:915), and that he used so many different sources that they "cannot possibly have been affected by any projection of my personality" (1985:911). The issue, though, is not number of sources used or their overall reliability.<sup>16</sup> Rather it is *how* the sources were used. Freeman states that his refutation of Mead was written to eliminate sources of error in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, to offer a new paradigm concerning the interaction of culture and biology, and to benefit the Samoan people with an accurate portrayal of their culture and history. Yet none of these goals is well served by a refutation that is itself flawed by the omission of significant passages from important sources. Their inclusion could make a difference in both Freeman's critique of Mead and his own assessment of Samoan sexual conduct.

What of Margaret Mead's reconstruction of the history of Samoan sexual conduct? Mead's argument is more in accord with the data presented in this article than Freeman's. And *Coming of Age in Samoa* deserves a careful reading (see Côté 1994 and Feinberg 1988). Yet Mead's account of the attenuation of the taupou system is very brief, and *Coming of Age* does contain errors of fact and interpretation, as well as overstatements. Given that it was a popular book initially published in 1928, this is not surprising. What is more surprising is how a senior scholar like Freeman, with his extensive knowledge of Samoa, could allow serious omissions and overstatements to mar the work he had contemplated and researched for almost 40 years.

Where does this leave the Mead-Freeman controversy? It will, no doubt, continue. As a spectator sport, the controversy has been riveting, but there are still issues that are unresolved. Beyond Freeman's and Mead's work, there is a body of historical data and ethnographic research on Samoa that is available and has been for some time. This work has not been well utilized in the controversy, in part because of the personalities involved and because issues relating to the politics of representation have been so compelling. Yet it is this body of work that is our best hope for resolving key issues in the Mead-Freeman controversy, for questioning the accuracy of reconstructions such as Freeman's, and for constructing better histories in the future.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

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1. Shweder is correct that there are other areas of the world that may be as sexually permissive as the Samoa Mead portrayed. Freeman cites Tahiti; Huntsman (1983) cites the Tuamotus; and Leacock (1992) cites the Trobriands.

2. Similarly, church marriages were the ideal for all ranks. For couples of lower rank, though, church marriages were "not very commonly realized among the population at large" (Freeman 1983c:241).

3. Coverage of the ethnographic literature from the 1960s through the 1980s is not possible here, but see Shankman (1994) for one such review. Freeman's own data indicate that in his study of a rural Western Samoan village, 27 percent of the female adolescents 14 to 19 had engaged in premarital sex. Mead's data indicate that 48 percent of the female adolescents in her sample from the Manu'a group engaged in premarital heterosexual activity.

4. Freeman's explanation of the discrepancy between the ideal of virginity and the reality of some premarital sex is twofold. He states that while the values of the taupou system applied to the whole of Samoan society, they applied "less stringently to those of lower rank" (1983c:236). More generally, Freeman finds that "such are the rigors of the Samoan rank system and so intense is the emotional ambivalence generated by omnipresent authority that this goal [of superordination and subordination] is all too frequently not attained" (1983c:130).

In terms of premarital sexual activity, Freeman provides statistical data on heterosexual activity for adolescent females, but not for adolescent males. Nor does he provide data on adolescent male and female homosexual activity; indeed, Freeman does not discuss either. Moreover, Freeman does not discuss the *fa'afafine* (male transvestite), a relatively common gender role today (Mageo 1992; see Besnier 1994 for a review of this phenomenon in the Pacific), or the *fa'atamà* (the female equivalent of the *fa'afafine*).

5. There are potential anomalies in using small data sets from a single village at a particular point in time. In the case of Freeman's data, there seems to be an anomaly in the group of 18-year-old girls. Running against the trend of increasing heterosexual activity by 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds, Freeman's 18-year-olds have the highest number of virgins (six of seven, or 86 percent) among the adolescents he studied. The 19-year-old girls in Freeman's group have the lowest number of virgins (two of five, or 40 percent). The general trend, found in

Mead's data as well, is that older girls are less likely to be virgins.

6. While many critiques of Freeman focus on his ethnography, relatively few refer to Samoan history (but see Côté 1992, 1994; Grant 1995; Holmes 1987; Leacock 1992; Nardi 1984; and Orans 1996). See Mageo's work (1992:447–448) for a discussion of changing marriage practices as a response to Christianity.

7. There are a number of sources on the taupou from the early colonial period, and Freeman cites many of these in the footnotes to his chapter "Sexual Mores and Behavior" (1983c). The following description of the taupou, and the more general political context in which her role was set, is a composite of these sources.

8. Pritchard describes in some detail what happened to former taupou and other castoff wives when they returned to their natal villages, noting that they were attached to the local guest house and were expected to provide certain services for visiting chiefs as part of customary hospitality (1866:133–134). These women were not permitted to marry again without permission of their former husbands, and, as a result of their liminal status, they often were available for interethnic relationships with Europeans. Krämer notes that these relationships gave Samoan women "a bad reputation in the South Seas regarding their morals" (1994:47). Krämer, however, believes that this reputation was unfounded and was the product of a misunderstanding of Samoan culture.

9. For another translation, see the Verhaaren edition of Krämer (1994:46–47).

10. Recently Freeman has employed the eyewitness testimony of Fa'apua'a Fa'amu, one of Margaret Mead's informants, to show that Mead was misled by Samoan girls telling jokes about their sexual activities in response to her questions (1991). See Côté (1994–95); Freeman (1994–95); and Orans (1996:90–100) on the relevance of this testimony.

11. Stanner became the head of the Department of Anthropology at the Research School for Pacific Studies at Australian National University, of which Freeman was a member. Freeman therefore probably had the opportunity to discuss differences of opinion about Samoa with Stanner personally. Stanner did differ with Freeman about his proposed research in the islands in the 1960s and opposed it (see Caton 1990:309–315).

12. Michener also describes a reunion he had decades later in New Zealand with some of the Samoan women he knew from his tour of duty in Western Samoa. They remembered well the interethnic unions that they participated in at that time (1992:40). For another perspective on these relationships, see Mageo 1996.

13. During World War II in Western Samoa, Freeman spent much of his time in the village of Sa'anapu, well away from main roads, major military bases, and the port town of Apia. He was given a manaia title and became nominal head of the group of untitled, unmarried men in the village. As a manaia who was fluent in Samoan, Freeman states that he was able to speak easily with young women and young men about many matters. Yet apart from a passing reference to fond memories of the young women of Sa'anapu, Freeman's only direct discussion of his findings on premarital sex among young women at that time is a statement that in 1943, "when

there were rumors abroad about the loss of their virginity," girls were made to swear on the Bible in public as to whether the rumors were true or not (1983b:124).

14. Mead does cite these authors in *The Social Organization of Manu'a* (1930).

15. Freeman does cite Lewis in other contexts, but does not discuss her mention of the use of pig's blood.

16. Nor are Freeman's academic credentials in dispute. In terms of fieldwork, archival research, and language ability, Freeman's credentials are outstanding. However, they do not make his history of Samoan sexual conduct immune from review and critique. Indeed, Freeman's credentials make his omissions more difficult to understand.

17. Here I am referring not only to European sources but to Samoan sources as well (see Meliese'a 1987a, 1987b).

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