

COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL
STUDY OF PRIMITIVE YOUTH FOR WESTERN
CIVILIZATION

Margaret Mead, 1928, William Morrow and Company, New York, Pp: xv-297

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Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization is a book written by American anthropologist Margaret Mead based upon her research and study of youth on the island of Ta'u in the Samoa Islands which primarily focused on adolescent girls. The foreward of the book is written by Franz Boas. Mead was 23 years old when she carried out her fieldwork in Samoa. First published in 1928, the book launched Mead as a pioneering researcher and the most famous anthropologist in the world. Since its first publication, *Coming of Age in Samoa* was the most widely read book in the field of anthropology and unleashed a storm of controversy, she argued that it was cultural factors rather than biological forces that caused adolescents to experience emotional and psychological stress. Though it was a popular success and has been used in numerous undergraduate anthropology classes, *Coming of Age in Samoa* has also received varying degrees of criticism over the years. Some of her results have been called into question by other anthropologists, and she has been criticized for romanticizing Samoan life and downplaying evidence contrary to her main argument. In addition, some Samoans have found her depiction of Samoan adolescent sexuality offensive.

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The book is divided into fourteen chapters along with foreward by Franz Boas, appendix and glossary of native terms used in the text. The chapters are:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: A day in Samoa

Chapter III: The education of the Samoan child

Chapter IV: The Samoan household.

Chapter V: The girl and her age group

Chapter VI: The girl in the community.

Chapter VII: Formal sex relations

Chapter VIII: The role of the dance .

Chapter IX: The attitude towards personality

Chapter X: The experience and in indivituality of the Average girl

Chapter XI: The girl in conflict

Chapter XII: Maturity and old age

Chapter XIII: Our educational problems in the light of Samoan contrasts

Chapter XIV: Education for choice

Mead's work had taken shape against a backdrop of broader anxieties about American youth generally and female adolescents specifically who were openly challenging social and sexual mores. Many contemporaries believed that the "storm and stress" of adolescence was biologically determined following a three-volume study of largely male adolescents by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904. Under the direction of her mentor, the anthropologist, Franz Boaz, Margaret Mead sought to study whether adolescence was a "period of mental and emotional distress for the growing girl as inevitably as teething is a period for the small baby? Can we think of adolescence as a time in the life history of every girl which carries with it symptoms of conflict and stress as surely as it implies a change in the girls' body." In the foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead's advisor, Franz Boas, wrote of its significance that, "Courtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards are universal, but what constitutes courtesy, modesty, good manners, and definite ethical standards is not universal. It is instructive to know that standards differ in the most unexpected ways."

Boas went on to point out that at the time of publication, many Americans had begun to discuss the problems faced by young people (particularly women) as they pass through adolescence as "unavoidable periods of adjustment." Boas felt that a study of the problems faced by adolescents in another culture would be illuminating. To test this hypothesis, Mead was sent to Samoa to find out whether the "emotional stress and turmoil" of American adolescence was biologically inherent or culturally determined. She studied 25 young women in three villages in Samoa and found that for them adolescence was neither stressful nor constrained. After 9 months of study, she concluded that "the adolescence is not necessarily a time of stress and strain, but that cultural conditions make it so". She explained the stress-free character of adolescence in Samoa with differing cultural and social arrangements of the Samoans, in particular a "general casualness" and "lack of deep feeling" that was their attitudes towards life. She especially pointed out that Samoan adolescent women enjoyed a casual sexual code, limited only for the daughters and wives of chiefs. Although missionaries were not supporters of such code, their protests were unimportant. The Samoan church also did not press youth too hard for participation that would curb their sexual freedom. Sexual jealousy was absent and rape was foreign to their thought. Mead pointed out that the less baffled choices of creeds and careers made them less stressful. Also, the child-rearing practices and attitudes toward sex accounted for the difference between American and Samoan adolescence. Especially, Samoan numerous adult caretakers released children from close attachments to their own parents, and knowledge of sexuality, birth, and death that Samoan adolescents acquired helped them gain mental health. With the analysis of the differences, Mead called for a change in American child education

Annotation

For many chapters we have followed the lives of Samoan girls, watched them change from babies to baby-tenders, learn to make the oven and weave fine mats, forsake the life of the gang to become more active members of the household, defer marriage through as many years of casual love-making as possible, finally marry and settle down to rearing children who will repeat the same cycle. As far as our material permitted, an experiment has been conducted to discover what the process of development was like in a society very different from our own. Because the length of human life and the complexity of our society did not permit us to make our experiment here, to choose a group of baby girls and bring them to maturity under conditions created for the

experiment, it was necessary to go instead to another country where history had set the stage for us. There we found girl children passing through the same process of physical development through which our girls go, cutting their first teeth and losing them, cutting their second teeth, growing tall and ungainly, reaching puberty with their first menstruation, gradually reaching physical maturity, and becoming ready to produce the next generation. It was possible to say: Here are the proper conditions for an experiment; the developing girl is a constant factor in America and in Samoa; the civilization of America and the civilization of Samoa are different. In the course of development, the process of growth by which the girl baby becomes a grown woman, are the sudden and conspicuous bodily changes which take place at puberty accompanied by a development which is spasmodic, emotionally charged, and accompanied by an awakened religious sense, a flowering of idealism, a great desire for assertion of self against authority—or not? Is adolescence a period of mental and emotional distress for the growing girl as inevitably as teething is a period of misery for the small baby? Can we think of adolescence as a time in the life history of every girl child which carried with it symptoms of conflict and stress as surely as it implies a change in the girl's body?

Following the Samoan girls through every aspect of their lives we have tried to answer this question, and we found throughout that we had to answer it in the negative. The adolescent girl in Samoa differed from her sister who had not reached puberty in one chief respect, that in the older girl certain bodily changes were present which were absent in the younger girl. There were no other great differences to set off the group passing through adolescence from the group which would become adolescent in two years or the group which had become adolescent two years before.