Name: Date:
Period:

Samoa Lost: Margaret Mead, Cultural Relativism, and the Guilty Imagination

From: E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, Ignatius Press, 1993

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1. Why do you think I made you read this article? In what way do you think it is related to this class?

2. When was Mead's book *Coming of Age in Samoa* published? In light of what you know about US history, how might the prevailing cultural trends of that time influenced the reception of her methodology and conclusions?

3. When was Mead most influential as an 'academic celebrity'? (it was during a time of great cultural upheaval) How might the prevailing cultural trends of that time have contributed to the respect and fame she received as an influential academic?

4. What, fundamentally, is the disagreement between Mead's and Freeman's understanding of Samoan culture? In other words, what did Mead advocate in her analysis that Freeman tried to refute in his own?

5. Jones claims that Mead 'influenced the way people were brought up in this country,' If so, how did she do so? What aspects of our contemporary culture might reflect her influence?

6. In light of what Jones tells you about Mead's professional background, what sorts of questions should be raised about Mead's qualifications for analyzing Samoan culture?

7. In what ways did Mead claim that Samoan culture contrasted with contemporary western culture, esp. with regard to western sexual morality? Which culture did she consider superior, and why?

8. What impact did Mead think Christianity had on Samoan sexual morality? What impact did Freeman claim that it had when he revisited Samoa? Why the difference?

9. What aspects of Mead's personal biography might have influenced her research on Samoan culture? What does this suggest about the nature of cultural research in general?

10. When Freeman went public with his criticism of Mead, how did the Academy respond? Why does Jones think it responded this way?

11. If Jones is right about Mead, what does his analysis suggest about the credibility of scholars and other experts who make claims about a given culture's concept of morality?

12. Jones thinks that Mead's behavior ultimately illustrates that she has not escaped the morality that she is so eager to deny. Why does he think this? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

13. If Jones is right about Mead, what does his analysis suggest about the power of scholars and 'public intellectuals' to influence cultural trends and public opinion? Is this a good or bad thing, and why? Under what circumstances would you be willing to change your opinion? My point: Whatever your thoughts on how good or bad it is, we rely on expert opinion all the time because we assume their opinions are more informed, i.e. based on greater knowledge of the subject. Can a culture really survive, thrive, progress without this? If so, how? If not, then we grant to experts tremendous power over the rest of us. How do we ensure that it is wielded responsibly? Think of this with respect to contemporary issues such as global warming, the war on terror, stem-cell research, the legality of abortion… the list could go on and on. To what extent is our opinion shaped by our TRUST (faith?) in the 'experts'? How do we know they are worthy of it?

14. You're headed to college shortly. You'll be sitting in front of the experts as they teach you what they know about their fields of expertise, and you'll be paying them for it. What exactly are you hoping to get from them? How will you know when you've gotten it?