

Open Forum 1

Web Site Transcript

Chapter 5

A = Professor

B = Daniel

A: Thank you. That was a very interesting presentation on Louis Leakey. Just give your report to me at the end of class. Okay, Daniel Acosta will be giving our final presentation of the day. Who will you be presenting on?

B: I'd like to present the famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead, to our class.

A: Excellent! Take it away!

B: Margaret Mead is well-known as one of the world's most famous anthropologists. She brought cultural anthropology to the American public. She helped us to understand the importance of culture and I think she's truly worth learning about.

Margaret Mead was born in 1901 in Philadelphia, and she was the child of well-educated parents. Margaret didn't attend elementary school but was educated at home. For instance, her mother and grandmother would ask her to observe nature to learn about science or to record the behavior of her sisters to learn about psychology. This early education set her on a path towards the social sciences. Later, she entered Barnard College and began studying psychology. She earned her PhD in anthropology from Columbia University in 1929. At Columbia University, Margaret met Frank Boas and Ruth Benedict, two very famous anthropologists. Dr. Boas and Dr. Benedict saw that Margaret was very intelligent and interested in anthropology, and they encouraged her to become an anthropologist too.

During the early 1900s, there was an American and European idea that Western civilization was better than other civilizations. Many western people believed that American or European culture was advanced and that other cultures were very basic, primitive, and immature. The other cultures weren't valued or respected by westerners. Margaret Mead did not feel this way; she was a cultural relativist. That is, she believed that anthropology should be scientific, and that anthropologists should observe cultures neutrally. That means anthropologists should study other people and other cultures without judgment, without the idea that they weren't as good as western culture. She believed that all cultures were valuable.

Although it was unusual for young women in the 1920s to travel alone, Margaret convinced her professor, Frank Boas, to let her study cultures in the south Pacific islands of Pago Pago, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea. During her trips to these islands, she observed everything. She learned the language, took notes, and interviewed many people. This way of studying and describing a culture is called "ethnography."

Margaret Mead found the Samoan culture particularly interesting. She studied girls in Samoa, and learned that the girls there had a less stressful life than American girls. In many ways, the Samoan girls had more freedom. She found that becoming a woman was different in Samoa than in the U.S. because the cultures had different ideas about what girls and women should be like. She found that culture affects and changes our personalities. Mead published a book in 1928 entitled *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Usually ethnographies like this are only read by other anthropologists, but Mead's book was a bestseller. She became very popular after this book was published.

Mead became a professor of anthropology, and she also worked for many years in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. She was the head of several important anthropology and science organizations, and she published over 20 books. She was very popular in her time and is still well-known as an important anthropologist. After she died in 1978, President Carter awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

One thing that makes me really like Margaret Mead is that she was very progressive. She was in favor of freedom and tolerance of all people. She supported civil rights and believed that humans could do really good things if they work together. She thought that ideas of racism or war were cultural and that people could learn better ways to live. Most importantly, she strongly believed that modern Americans could learn from other cultures. In 1928 she wrote, "As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate lovingly, our own."

Thank you.