Coming Of Age In Somoa Essay, Research Paper

Margaret Mead?s ?Coming of Age in Samoa?, which was actually her

doctoral

dissertation, was compiled in a period of six months starting in 1925.

Through it, people

were given a look at a society not affected by the problems of 20th century

industrial

America. She illustrated a picture of a society where love was available for

the asking and

crime was dealt with by exchanging a few mats. This book helps one to realize

the large

role played by social environment.

One of Mead?s biggest challenges was probably the fact that her fieldwork

was

done entirely in the Samoan language. In Samoa, few, if any natives spoke

English.

To get information, Mead spent her time talking to approximately 25 Samoan

women.

However, she spent much of her focus on two young Samoan women, Fa?apua?a

Fa?amu

and Fofoa. It is said that one Samoan woman?s life is very much like the

next. At the

time of her visit to Samoa, Mead, a graduate student was only 23 years old.

She was

barely older than the girls she interviewed and lovingly called her ?merry

companions?.

The vision recieved while reading ?Coming of Age in Samoa? is that it is

a place of

nearly stress free living. The children pass through adolescence without the

many

pressures put upon teenagers in an industrial America:

…adolescence represented no period of crisis or stress,

but was instead an orderly developing of a set of slowly

maturing interests and activities (95).

According to Mead, families are large, taboos and restrictions are few, and

disagreements

are settled by the giving of mats. The stresses encountered by American

teenagers are

unknown to their Samoan counterparts. Mead refers to premarital sex as the

?pastime par

excellence? for Samoan youth. She writes that Samoa is a virtual paradise

of free love, as

the young people from 14 years of age until they are married have nothing on

their minds

except sex. Of Samoan girls Mead says:

She thrusts virtuosity away from her as she thrusts away

from her every other sort of responsibility with the invariable

comment, ?Laitit a?u? (?I am but young?). All of her interest

is expanded on clandestine sex adventures (33).

She explains that growing up can be free, easy and uncomplicated. Romantic

love in

Samoa is not bound with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, jealousy and

fidelity as it is in

America.

Evidently, due to the lack of privacy in the homes, young lovers are forced

to meet

in the trees. Even married people have trouble finding privacy:

But the lack of privacy within the houses where a mosquito

netting marks off purely formal walls about the married

couples and the custom of young lovers to use the palm

groves for the rendezvous (84).

As far as the act of sex, much pressure is put on the man to perform:

The Samoan puts the burden of amatory success upon the

man and believes that woman need more initiating, more time

for maturing of sexual feeling. A man who fails to satisfy a

woman is looked upon as clumsy, inept blunderer….(91)

The day in Samoa begins at dawn, and you can hear the shouts of young men.

Most of

the time, the people go to sleep around midnight and after that you only hear

the whispers

of lovers.

Mead tells of how birthdays are not of importance, but the day of birth is,

especially with highly ranked babies. On this day there is a great feast and

property is

given away. The first baby must always be born in the village of the mother.

For months

before the birth, the family of the father brings food while the family of

the mother makes

clothes. At the birth, the fathers mother or sister must be present to take

care of the

newborn. There is no privacy and the woman is not allowed to cry out in pain.

It is not

uncommon for 20 to 30 people to be present at the birth, and to stay all

night if necessary.

Once the cord is cut by the midwife the feast begins. If the baby is a girl,

the cord is

buried under a mulberry tree to ensure that she will be good at household

tasks. If the

child is a boy it is thrown into the sea so that he will be a skilled

fisherman, or planted

under a plant to make him a good farmer. Unless a woman gets pregnant again,

she will

nurse her child until it is two or three years old.

Once the baby starts growing into a toddler, there are many strict rules they

are

expected to follow. The first is that they must only learn to crawl and sit

within the house.

Once they can stand, they are never to stand while addressing an adult. All

children must

know to stay out of the sun, and to never tangle the strands of a weaver. It

is also not

acceptable for a child, no matter how young, to scatter the cut up coconut

which is spread

out to dry. The last rule that she speaks of is that the children must make

sure that their

loin clothes are attached at all times. The girls principle task while

growing up is to learn

to weave. In fact, a girls chances of marriage are badly damaged if the

village hears that

she is lazy in domestic tasks.

The Samoan village is made up of 30 to 40 households and the master is called

the

matai. Any older relative has a right to demand personal service or to

criticize the

conduct and interfere with the affairs of a younger relative. The most

important

relationship within a Samoan household is that between brother and sister.

This does not

even necessarily mean by blood. This relationship is of the most importance

in influencing

the lives of young people. The word aiga is used to cover all relationships

by blood,

marriage and adoption. The family cooking is taken are of by both sexes, but

the majority

of the work falls upon the boys and young men. The agricultural work is done

by the

women. This includes the weeding, transplanting, gathering, transportation of

the food

and the gathering of mulberry wands. Mead also speaks about the social

network in

Samoa, especially in reference to the chiefs role. While speaking to a chief

he explains:

I have been a chief only four years and look my hair is grey…I

must always act as if I were old. I must walk gravely and with

measured step. I may not dance except upon most solemn

occasions, neither may I play games with the young men…

Thirty-one people live in my household. For them I must plan,

I must find them food and clothing, settle their disputes, arrange

their marriages…It is hard to be so young and yet to be a chief

(Mead 36).

Boys in Samoa are circumcised in pairs and make the arrangements to do so

themselves. They do this by seeking out an older man who has a reputation for

skill. The

boys in the pair are considered to be very close, and it is even all right

for them to have

casual sexual relationships. Boys do not start to go after girls until two or

three years

after puberty, and when they do they have their friends speak to her.

When they get older, the women are dependent on their husbands for social

status.

The village princess is not actually what we could consider a princess. She

takes on the

job of the village servant. She waits on strangers, spreads their beds and

makes kava. Her

marriage, however, is a village event, planned by talking chiefs and their

wives. In Samoa

there are not the taboos about women that are present in other cultures. The

only taboos

that they have about women is that she cannot touch the fishing canoes or

fishing tackle.

If she were too it would allegedly ruin the fishing. When a man dies, it is

the job of his

maternal aunt or his sister to prepare the body by rubbing it with oil. Than

she sits there

by the dead body to fan away the flies it may attract. A man who commits

adultery with a

chief wife is beaten and banished a possibly even drowned. The wife of the

chief will only

be cast out.

A similar tradition is that is the taupo, who is the village ceremonial

hostess, was

found not to be a virgin she is beaten by her female relatives. This beating

includes

disfiguring and even fatally injuring her. It is actual considered illegal

for her to have sex

before marriage. At her wedding in front everyone her virginity is to be

taken by the

talking chief. This custom is slowly dying out, but was in full force at the

time of Mead?s

visit.

An important part of Mead?s dissertation was her study of the casual sex

relations.

After a girl is eight or nine years old she has learned not to approach a

group of older

boys. However, when it comes to younger boys, they are taught to antagonize

them. The

boys are considered ?older? after they have been circumcised. When a girl

is looking for

her first lover, she looks to an older man, most often a widower or a

divorcee. There are

two types of sexual relations other than marriage that are recognized by

Samoans. These

include love affairs between unmarried young people, and also adultery.

Although

virginity is not expected in girls, Mead claims that it defiantly adds to

their attractiveness.

Essentially, having sex with a virgin is much more of a feat for a man than

sex with a girl

who is not. Marriage in Samoa is regarded as a social and economic

arrangement in which

relative wealth, rank and the skill of both husband and wife must be

considered.

In conclusion, Margaret Mead?s dissertation on Samoa is still interesting

after 75

years. The customs of Samoans, especially those regarding sex are very

interesting to

people of other cultures. This society rests most of their regard on love and

happiness and

seem to have been successful in achieving that.