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# The Historical Study of Ethnographic Fieldwork: Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune Among the Mountain Arapesh

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## THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK: MARGARET MEAD AND REO FORTUNE AMONG THE MOUNTAIN ARAPESH<sup>1</sup>

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Although fieldwork has long been central to the discipline of anthropology, there are very few third-person studies focusing on the fieldwork of individual ethnographers in the history of anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists have reflected richly on their own fieldwork experiences in monographs, memoirs, and novels. But apart from studies of the development of fieldwork as a disciplinary practice (e.g., Stocking 1983), the tendency is for historians of anthropology to treat fieldwork as merely one episode in a larger narrative focusing on an anthropologist's intellectual trajectory and personal and scholarly influences, taking for granted the situation that the anthropologist encountered in the field.

In this paper, we sketch a programmatic argument about the historiography of ethnographic fieldwork that begins from the premise that a field situation is not encountered but *constructed* by the fieldworker, in interaction with others, through the unfolding process of fieldwork itself. Normally, so many aspects of an ethnographic research situation are beyond the fieldworker's control (and the historian's grasp) that it can appear as if "the field" were a cultural given. But in many ways the situations that anthropologists experience in the field are ones that they themselves have played a role in shaping. This is manifestly true with respect to such practical and political factors as linguistic skill, the kind of lifestyle one maintains, and one's social affiliations within a community. But it is also true of more subtle psychological factors like the emotional qualities of the fieldworker's social relationships and the ways these reflect back on his or her own identity (see Devereux 1967). It is not just the fieldworker's intellect that is engaged in the collection of ethnographic material, but the entire person—heart, body, and mind—that apperceives, interprets, and shapes the situations that form the experiential basis of his or her knowledge of the culture.

Our attention was drawn to this process of construction by a remarkable conflict of ethnographic interpretation in the history of anthropology. We did fieldwork in the late 1990s in the Mountain Arapesh region of Papua New Guinea, which had been previously studied in the 1930s by Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune. Although Mead and Fortune did

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented by Ira Bashkow at a panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California, in November 2006. The paper builds on archival research in the Margaret Mead Papers at the Library of Congress, as well as on the authors' field experiences in the Mountain Arapesh region. Dobrin conducted fieldwork on Arapesh languages from December 1997 to March 1999; Bashkow joined her for nine of these months. Most of this time in the field was spent in Wautogik village on the Sepik coast in East Sepik Province, PNG. Short trips were also made throughout the region to gather comparative data. Dobrin's fieldwork was made possible by an NSF Dissertation Improvement Grant, a Fulbright-Hays Training Grant for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad, a Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research Predoctoral Grant, and the kindness and generous support of the people of Wautogik Village. Work in the Margaret Mead Papers was carried out with support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies at the University of Virginia. A number of friends and colleagues provided inspiration and helpful comments on various facets of this project; these include Ellen Contini-Morava, Fred Damon, Patricia Francis, David Golumbia, Richard Handler, Riki Kuklick, Roger Lohmann, Susan McKinnon, Peter Metcalf, Andrew Moutu, Bernard Narokobi, Jim Roscoe, Rupert Stasch, George Stocking, Gerald Sullivan, and Roy Wagner.

<sup>2</sup>See, for examples, Bashkow 1991; Clifford 1982, 1983; Schumaker 2001; Stocking 1992; and Young 2004.

their fieldwork as a married couple working as partners (as did we), the portrayals of the culture they subsequently offered differ from one another in striking ways. In her best-selling book Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935), Mead famously concluded that Mountain Arapesh culture embodies a nurturing, maternal, and peaceful ideal for both sexes. But Fortune objected to this description, and in obscure publications, manuscript fragments, and a great mass of letters he countered it with a view of Arapesh culture that emphasized the brutal politics of interlocality rivalry, adultery capers, and warfare (Fortune 1939). In effect, then, we found ourselves following in the footsteps of two trained observers who were in the same place at the same time, yet who interpreted the culture in opposing ways. How could this have happened? In inquiring into this problem, we have encountered a great deal of scholarship that approaches the matter in the way described above, that is, in terms of the anthropologists' intellectual predispositions and the personal and historical influences that directed their interpretations. Of course, the approach of sophisticated intellectual historians emphasizes that anthropologists perceive and interpret their field experiences through any number of filtering constructs, such as prior assumptions, cultural blind spots, personal inclinations, and theoretical models and aims. But in the rest of this paper, we suggest that even though this approach is highly fruitful and absolutely necessary, it still yields only partial accounts.

### **The Intellectual History Approach to Mead's Arapesh Ethnography: Its Achievements and Limitations**

Mead's writings would seem to make a banner case for the utility of the intellectual history approach to understanding past ethnographic interpretations. Her interpretation of Arapesh culture in Sex and Temperament is part of a triad of New Guinea case studies that has a conceptual architecture remarkably parallel to the three case studies in Patterns of Culture (1934) by Ruth Benedict, Mead's close friend. Mead's triad also reflects her participation in a romantic triangle with Gregory Bateson, whose Iatmul fieldsite was near to Mead and Fortune's Tchambuli. In particular, as we argue elsewhere, each of the three cultural case studies in Mead's book is in key respects a "writ-large" expression of the core personality traits Mead discerned in herself and the two men as she analyzed their relationships (Bashkow 2003; Bashkow and Dobrin in prep; see also Boon 1985). Mead actually formalized these correspondences between the cultures she studied and her small circle of friends in a fourfold typology that she called the "theory of the squares" (Sullivan 2004). She used this scheme to categorize the cultures she investigated and read about, as well as various celebrities and virtually all of her friends, placing them along two axes, Northern-to-Southern and Turk-to-Fey, which she conceptualized as coordinating inborn temperaments with physiological traits (see also Mead 1972:154-158; Kretschmer 1925, 1970[1929]). Even into her old age Mead regarded "the squares" as her most original and important theoretical contribution, though she feared publishing it at the time she was developing it (in the 1930s and '40s) due to its similarities to Nazi race theory.

In sum, there are a number of good reasons why Mead's interpretation of the Arapesh might be explained by appealing to factors like intellectual predisposition and influence. As for her filtering processes, it may be enough to point out that Sex and Temperament has been criticized since the time of its publication for the "perplexing discrepancies" that exist between numerous ethnographic details she reported and the general interpretation she gave them (Thurnwald 1936:664; see also Lohmann 2004). For example, though one of Mead's main theses in the book is that the Arapesh are peaceful,

nurturing, and averse to aggression, in an early review Richard Thurnwald compiled an impressive list of details in Mead's book that would seem to vitiate this conclusion, including among them "quarrels over women," "man and wife attacking each other with axes," "men beating their wives," "a quarrel which followed the abduction of a woman," "a mother trying to strangle her baby and stepping on the head of another," "violent, unreasonable rages," and the regular "resort to sorcery" within a system of institutionalized hostilities (1936: 665-6; see also Fortune 1939). Such discrepancies have not been resolved with the passage of time. They are central to Paul Roscoe's 2003 argument that in dismissing the importance of violence and warfare among the Arapesh, Mead "got it wrong" (2003: 586), a view that is also supported by our own fieldwork and research on the ethnohistory of Arapesh war alliances (Dobrin and Bashkow 2006). For better or worse, we are in a strong position to criticize Mead's image of the "peaceful, nurturing Arapesh" as an interpretation that reflects her intellectual predispositions as much as it does her data.

Thus, we have no doubt that a critique of Mead's ethnography in terms of an intellectual history approach is warranted and indeed necessary. But it is not sufficient. After all, this approach disregards past anthropologists' own sense of what they were doing. What Mead was attempting to produce was a study of Arapesh culture, not an ethnographically-coded form of her own autobiography! And if she had doubted that the cultural patterns she described really existed "out there," surely she would have thought twice before publishing so much evidence contradicting her main argument. Indeed, as Roscoe notes, it is remarkable that "she made no attempt to shovel [such evidence] under the carpet" (Roscoe 2003: 585). When Mead insisted in the face of critical reviews that the ethnographic patterns she reported in her book were "actually a reflection of the form which lay in [the] cultures themselves" (Mead 1950: vi), she showed her conviction in the experiences she had had in the field. But, we argue, these were not—and could not be—unmediated engagements with Arapesh people. Rather, they were experiences of a particular field situation, the one she in part co-constructed through her relationships with Arapesh people.

### **The Co-Constructed Situation of Mead and Fortune's Arapesh Fieldwork**

What might a constructionist historiography of fieldwork look like for Mead and Fortune among the Mountain Arapesh? Here, in summary form, are three key points that are emerging in our work on this case.<sup>3</sup>

First, by posing the question of how these two ethnographers contributed to constructing the cultural realities they experienced in their fieldwork, we learn that their interpretive conflict stemmed in part from a marked difference in the way each participated in the extended Arapesh regional network that was constituted by travel and that was the medium for interlocality competition and political/warfare alliances. Even though the two ethnographers were working together, on a day to day basis they were often apart. As is well known, Mead's bad ankle confined her to their village fieldsite of Alitua for the full eight months of their stay among the Arapesh. Because the Arapesh mountain terrain is steep and rugged, she had to be carried into and out of the village at the start and end of her time there, and we have clear evidence that she never stepped beyond the village perimeter. By contrast, Fortune traveled widely and frequently with parties of Arapesh people, on his and Mead's own errands as well as on theirs, staying away from the village for long stretches of

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<sup>3</sup>We expect to more fully develop and exemplify these arguments in subsequent publications.

time. His travels took him on pathways and past battlegrounds that elicited from his Arapesh companions stories of great alliances, rivalries, and the politics of adultery that provoked men to war. There was nothing comparable in Mead's experience that testified to this precolonial Arapesh culture of conflict, and it found no place in her ethnography (Dobrin and Bashkow 2006).

Second, Mead and Fortune experienced Mountain Arapesh life in the form of a particular social world they partially created in interaction with the villagers through their fieldwork strategies. Here, the primary issue is the way they set up their household and conducted their local exchange relations. The villagers had to be prevailed upon to build the anthropologists a house, something they were unwilling to do until Fortune promised that they would be richly rewarded with foreign commodities they desired, such as matches and salt (MMP: Mead Bulletin Letter 1/15/32, p. 1 [N92: 5]). But the anthropologists's relations with the villagers soon soured after the high expectations Fortune raised were shattered, no doubt unavoidably. Although the anthropologists were generous in providing food to workers during the period of active housebuilding, the villagers were disappointed by the small knives given out at the house completion feast, by the fact that many people received no gifts at all, and by the lack of any distribution of food for the housebuilders and their hosts to carry home with them. Mead recorded that as the feast was concluding, when evening was falling, the women stood up and gave a "long speech saying that they would now have to go to their distant gardens for food because all their supplies were exhausted"—clearly expressing their dissatisfaction at the visitors' ungenerosity, which left them empty-handed (Mead 1947: 237). Every last native of the village cleared out immediately. As Mead reports: "The sun went down on our first night in the new house with Alitua, the largest village of the Mountain Arapesh, absolutely empty, except for ourselves and our boys, all newcomers" (237).

The presence of the "boys"—young men brought from elsewhere as servants by Mead and Fortune—was a further complicating factor in their village relationships. The boys' social status was awkward inasmuch as, being outsiders, they should have been hosted by the villagers but were instead being hosted—fed—by the whites. And it was the boys, not the villagers, who received most of the material benefits the anthropologists brought. Fearing jealousy, the boys frequently ran away; indeed, this is one of the main comedic themes in Mead's letters (see Mead 1977, MMP). Their social awkwardness also found expression in a continuing series of petty disputes (and was further aggravated by them), such as those provoked when the boys hunted game—as Mead and Fortune charged them to do—near the village without compensating the local landowners. One of the main ways in which the villagers apparently registered their displeasure was by staying away from the village for weeks at a stretch, so that Mead's main informants, such as the well-known Unabelin, were their boys and other outsiders—here again, the whites' village guests. As a result of this, the contexts in which Mead found herself interacting with people were primarily ones that required them to be deferential, diplomatic, and humble. The markers of this in Arapesh discourse are gentle tone and an emphasis on agreeable themes like the importance of mutual help, nurture, and peace; and since these closely resemble core qualities of Mead's American construction of femininity, we infer that her dominant impression of Arapesh cultural temperament was formed in significant part from observing the deferential behavior evoked in a particular village situation that she and Fortune did much to create.

Third, and finally, Mead, much more than Fortune, maintained in the field a strong orientation toward her own home frame of reference. When contemporary researchers use

the Margaret Mead Papers in the Library of Congress, they are uniformly impressed—even amazed—by the sheer volume of her output of letters from the field: hers is a truly immense archive. The conventional approach is to treat her letter writing as an activity ancillary to Mead’s fieldwork, something she did over and beyond it, and analyze it in terms of its contents and correspondents. But precisely because she did so much of it, we can also see Mead’s letter writing as a central aspect of her field experience. It was compounded by her diary-keeping, the effort she and Fortune invested in the management of their supply stores, and the multitudinous note-slips she typed and filed daily according to an anthropological system of categories, all of which served to sustain her orientation to her home frame of reference: the home plans and relationships that she maintained through her correspondence and the intellectual currents in anthropology that she kept abreast of—and even to some extent tried to direct—while remaining physically present in the New Guinea village. It is thus no accident that Mead’s portrayal of the Arapesh is so brightly illumined by the conventional intellectual history approach that makes visible the influence of relationships stemming from the anthropologist’s home culture. Indeed, the importance of those relationships is itself motivated by the particular social and material situation she constructed and experienced during her fieldwork.

### **The Concept of the Constructed Field Situation as a Methodological Resource for the History of Anthropology**

Through these examples we wish to show two things. One is that because an anthropologist’s actions in the field are interpreted by people in the host society from their own cultural perspective, they can be consequential for the construction of the field situation, and hence for the resulting ethnography, in ways the researcher may not appreciate while in the field and so not report. Mead understood her confinement to Alitua as a matter of areal coverage. She knew that it disadvantaged her relative to Fortune in the ability to make comparisons within the region and trace out the larger exchange system, but she did not see that it led her to minimize whole domains of cultural life. Mead’s intensive letter writing illustrates this principle as well. It is an aspect of her field situation that is evident from the nature of her archive, and she refers to it frequently in the letters themselves. But because it was something she saw as part of her informal activity in the field rather than part of her research, it did not figure in her lengthy discussion of methodology (Mead 1940: 325ff.), even though it clearly shaped her field experience and thus her view of the culture.<sup>4</sup>

The other thing we wish to show is how the historical study of fieldwork is facilitated by an independent analysis of the ethnography and local historical context.<sup>5</sup> When Mead reported that the Alituaans left the village after their housebuilding feast, she took at face value the village women’s statement that they were going to their gardens because they lacked food, a “datum” that contributed to her view of the Arapesh as poor and peripatetic (see, e.g., Mead 1947: 210-211). In interpreting such an example, western historians’ own commonsense is something of an aid (why would women be heading into the rainforest to hike to distant food gardens at eveningtime?). But of even greater utility is knowledge of the

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<sup>4</sup>Letters from the field do receive brief mention, but only insofar as they are “theoretical letters written to other scientists during the field period” and so potentially relevant in terms of their content (Mead 1940:331).

<sup>5</sup>The point is not to reanalyze the ethnographic record as anthropologists would in order to settle its rights and wrongs, but to apply a knowledge of the culture as historians, in reconstructing, analyzing, and narrativizing fieldwork events.

local cultural principle that a feast from which guests depart empty-handed is a failure. Since this was not apparent to Mead or Fortune, it remains for the historian to grasp that the women's speeches about food and the state of their households were, in the discursive norms of this culture, complaints about the anthropologists' conduct that would have repercussions for their fieldwork. Similarly with the example of Mead's frequent reports of her boys running away: it is for us to see beyond the colonial comedy of unreliable natives that Mead presents as embellishments to her ethnography. But in order to do this, we need to know enough about landowners' rights and Arapesh hospitality to appreciate that the boys were in an impossible situation, caught between the legitimate rights and expectations of the village landowners on the one hand, and the boys' obligations to their white employers on the other. Mead presents these events without really interpreting them because they did not make sense to her, but neither do they stand out as enigmas in her texts. What makes them noteworthy to us is our independent understanding of what they mean from an Arapesh point of view. The fact that these responses to the anthropologists' actions were ultimately significant for their descriptions of "the culture" shows the importance of developing perspectives on field events other than the fieldworker's own (see also Bashkow 1991, 2006; Dobrin and Bashkow 2006).

Looking back at an anthropological encounter from the viewpoint of those studied takes advantage of the distinctive characteristics of ethnographic fieldwork as a method for achieving cultural understanding. Fieldworkers confront their host culture not only as an object of study, but also as something they participate in in practical ways. As they do so, they become involved in particular kinds of social situations and not others, they habitually spend time in particular places to the exclusion of others, and they become enmeshed in relationships with particular individuals whose personalities, background experiences, behavioral patterns, and social positions all combine to help create the fieldworker's experience of the culture as a whole. From an intellectual history point of view, where the larger narrative frame is the biographical development of a scholar's views and ideas, the field is typically taken for granted, with the stress instead on how and why the researcher interpreted it as he or she did. But if we are to work toward *a historical understanding of the process of ethnographic knowledge production* itself, we cannot bracket off the field, nor the fieldworker's role in creating the evolving field situation. For it is here that, through an unfolding series of activities and relationships, the field is co-constructed by the anthropologist and those he or she studies.

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MMP: Margaret Mead Papers and South Pacific Ethnographic Archives. Manuscript Division. Library of Congress. Washington, DC. Citation gives box:file numbers.

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- Rohde, Joy. 2007. 'The Social Scientists' War': Expertise in a Cold War Nation. University of Pennsylvania.

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