

MARGARET MEAD AND GREGORY BATESON IN THE SEPIK, 1938: A TIMELY POLEMIC FROM A LOST ANTHROPOLOGICAL EFFLORESCENCE

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Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's 1938 study of a Iatmul-speaking village in the middle Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, remains an anthropological efflorescence. At the very least, this collaboration resulted in a well-known fieldwork photo: Mead and Bateson in the famous "mosquito room." Ironically, little is actually known about the 1938 undertaking, which remains, however famous, sadly obscure. Towards correcting this misjudgment, I have two objectives. First, I want to provide a selective overview of the 1938 project, focusing on its unique outlook, tone, voices, morality, and theoretical perspectives. But my objective is not merely historical and descriptive. Hence, my second goal is polemical: to argue that Mead and Bateson's long-ago study, at once famous and obscure, is wholly relevant for contemporary anthropology.

Introduction

CONSIDER A FAMOUS ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT: the 1938 "mosquito room" in Tambunum, a Iatmul village in the Sepik River of what is now Papua New Guinea. Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, poised before their typewriters, transcribe hand-written jottings into formal fieldnotes. Perhaps no photo, however mute, more famously typifies the collaborative, dialogical creation of anthropological fieldwork.¹ Ironically, anthropology has little understanding of what Mead and Bateson were actually writing. Few have read the notes. Consequently, my task here is to begin re-animating this photo with voice and relevance. No longer should one of the great collaborative projects of 20th-century social science remain quiet.

In 1938, Mead and Bateson conducted a six-month study in the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum in the middle Sepik River of what was then the

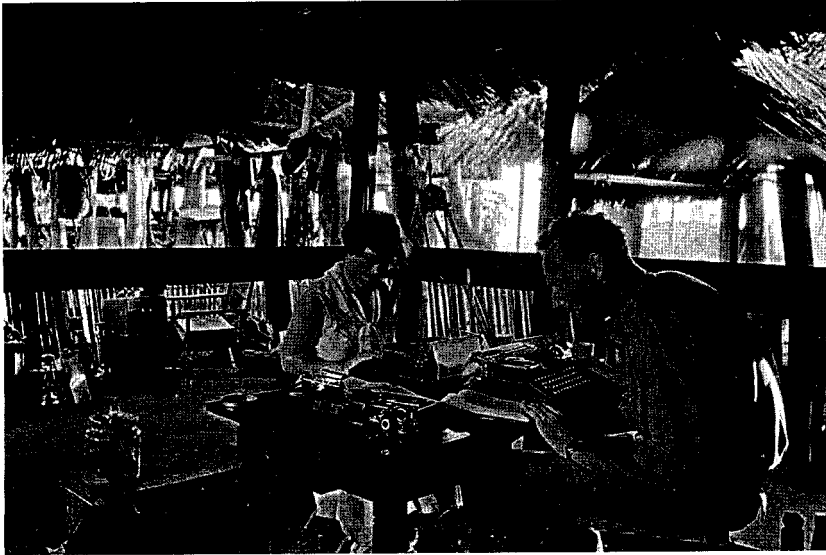


FIGURE 1. “Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson typing fieldnotes in the mosquito room, Tambunum Village, 1938.” (Photograph by Gregory Bateson and reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

Territory of New Guinea. The resulting unpublished notes, myriad photographs, and hours of film provide keen insights into one of the “classic” peoples of anthropology. The 1938 effort thus complemented Bateson’s earlier ethnography of Iatmul (e.g., 1932, 1936). But Mead and Bateson also compared Iatmul to Bali, Tehambuli, Mundugumor, Arapesh, Manus, and Samoa, thus coalescing some of the key ethnographies of the early 20th-century. They discussed Anna Freud and Erik Erikson; theorized about sequences of social interaction; pondered cross-cultural differences in motivation, gender, emotion, and socialization; and reflected on individual and cultural “consistency.” Mead and Bateson collected scores of children’s drawings. They recorded genealogies, life histories, character sketches, feuds, crocodile hunts, house building, funerary ceremonies, courtship rites, death, birth, and baths. They typed 2,500 pages of notes, developed 10,000 photos, and shot 10,000 feet of film.² They performed, to echo Mead, a lifetime of work in six months.

The 1938 project exemplified many of the classic intellectual tropes of modernism such as confidence, clarity, holism, and comparison. Indeed, the Tambunum collaboration prefigured several key moments and paradigms in mid-century to post-War social thought, including psychological anthro-

pology, cybernetics, communications theory, and the double-bind theory of schizophrenia. More than that, Mead and Bateson anticipated many of the ethical and humanistic issues that beset contemporary anthropology. In short, the 1938 project reveals a moral sensibility and a nuanced, sometimes poetic vision of culture that are wholly relevant for the 21st century.

Yet Mead and Bateson published only snippets from this project, no monograph, and a few short films.³ The 1938 study has remained relatively obscure, a mute moment in the history of anthropology wanting for greater voice. This essay, then, is a modest rehabilitation and defense of Mead and Bateson that sees the 1938 fieldnotes as the foundation for an unwritten book that I would call *Iatmul Character*. My goal in this essay is not merely to record the actual voices and tones of this fieldwork. Rather, I have a more polemical point: Mead's 1938 Iatmul research contains important messages for anthropology today.

“Concrete Masses of Material”

I never met Mead or Bateson. But I have dwelled in their shadows since my early graduate studies in the mid-1980s. I studied with David Lipset who, after writing Bateson's biography (Lipset 1982), began ongoing ethnography with Kathleen Barlow among the Murik of the Sepik Estuary—on Mead's suggestion (Lipset 1997; see also Barlow 2001). While Lipset did not himself conduct fieldwork in the middle Sepik, I did. In fact, I went to the precise village where Mead and Bateson centered their 1938 project, Tambunum, and where I have studied since the late 1980s (Silverman 2001, 2004).⁴ For me, the proverbial “field” is rich with anthropological legacy. Tales about my predecessors were among the first anecdotes I heard in Tambunum.

There is a valid point to this self-indulgence. As an “ethnographic double” to Mead and Bateson—who, to me, must remain unknowable, a predicament discussed by Nancy Lutkehaus (1990) in regard to Camilla Wedgewood—my own commitment to the 1938 fieldnotes is hardly impartial. I do not seek to refute Mead and Bateson's perspectives on Iatmul. Quite the opposite. I find the rigor and accuracy of their Iatmul ethnography to be exemplary. When Mead typed a list of “Research Points” for the Iatmul project on 18 April 1938, she indicated the importance of obtaining “concrete masses of material” on a wide variety of topics, ranging from father-son behavior, to courtship, to the histories of clan fragmentation. And “concrete masses of material” they got.

Mead's Iatmul notes offer thoughtful reflections on culture theory, ritual fantasy, gender, socialization, personality, and emotion. Moreover, Mead thoroughly grounded her theoretical notions in meticulous fieldwork. From

the perspective of the 1938 notes, then, Mead was a brilliant fieldworker. She possessed a gifted ability to encapsulate and evoke the emotional tones and Malinowskian “imponderabilia” of daily life. Mead’s skill at observing and recording fleeting gestures, minute turns of posture, and ephemeral wisps of interaction was uncanny. In short, the 1938 fieldnotes disclose remarkable ethnographic perception.

From Bali to New Guinea

The goal of the 1938 project was to expand on the more famous Balinese study that immediately preceded it. This earlier ethnography resulted in the pioneering book, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (Bateson and Mead 1942; see also Mead and Macgregor 1951; Lakoff 1996; and Sullivan 1999). The novel methodology of *Balinese Character* substituted and juxtaposed photos with two distinct styles of text: Bateson’s analytic and philosophical sophistication, honed through the writing of *Naven* (1936), and Mead’s impressionistic prose, partly inspired from Ruth Benedict. Additionally, Mead and Bateson sought to introduce greater rigor into *her* focus on emotion, and greater humanism into *his* epistemology. From this angle, the photographs in *Balinese Character* mediated between Mead’s now-more-scientific humanism and Bateson’s now-more-humanistic science.

Balinese Character is anthropology’s earliest experimental, polyvocal ethnography. The book disperses its authority among multiple modes of representation, and “plays” with the dissonances and symmetries between two literary genres and visuality. The 1938 project likewise offers an embedded series of anthropological conversations, as befitting the famous photo of the “mosquito room”—conversations between Mead and Bateson, between text and image, between culture and body, as I will amplify momentarily, and between Iatmul and other Pacific societies. Mead and Bateson understood in the 1930s what Clifford Geertz (1973) said forty years later: “the line between the mode of representation and substantive content is . . . undrawable.”

Of course, Mead had been doing this all along, even before she met Bateson. *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928) transgressed scientific canons. Long-ago, Mead presaged anthropological interpretivism, postmodernism, and feminism (see Lutkehaus 1990; Sanjek 1990b). Astonishingly, *Balinese Character* and Mead’s non-Samoan work is largely absent from these recent paradigms (see also Lutkehaus 1995). However, the 1938 study, like *Balinese Character*, is a self-conscious meditation on the literary “crisis of representation” that was composed decades before Marcus and Fisher (1986) canonized this “crisis” in anthropology.

Voice

Although the 1938 fieldnotes record actual dialogue between Mead and Bateson, it is Mead's voice that we hear (see also Romanucci-Ross 1976). And while it is Bateson's eye that looks through the viewfinder, he focuses on interactions that we should associate with Mead: children, for example, and mothers. Bateson's own Iatmul fieldnotes from the later 1920s and early 1930s were largely descriptive rather than analytical, as Bateson himself admits in his book *Naven*, where theoretical innovation arose *after* the fieldwork experience. By contrast, many of the observations in the 1938 fieldnotes are directly tied to sweeping points of epistemological and methodological importance. Yet these high-level concerns continuously dialogue with an acute attention to detail that captures the emotional tones of the moment (see also Yans-McLaughlin 1986:190–192).⁵ Mead's genius was to draw broad, humanistic conclusions of widespread appeal while remaining within the space of concrete ethnography. The literary qualities of the notes are a shifting amalgam of voice, gender, focus, cadence, style, tone, and tempo, from leisurely discussions about individual personalities to the hectic pace of second-by-second observations.

Mead's notes literally represent the dialogical quality of her ethnography. On the left-hand side of the page she transcribed her precise observations of on-the-ground activity, often timed to the second! On the right-hand side Mead later added theoretical elaboration. For example, here are observations from 6 May 1938, updated three days afterward: "Namungku suckling at r[igh]t breast. Pulls at mother[']s] pulpul, holds shell left hand, puts r[igh]t hand to nipple, changes hands, holds breast with left hand, shell with r[igh]t sucks on." To this, Mead added these comments:

Watch these shells as moveable breasts. . . . Consider the relationship of moveable breasts, and the idea of woman as made up of moveable parts (note vulvas handled as separate objects in initiatory ceremonies) with tales of thefts of flutes, bullroarers, beards. . . . If teething children chew of these hard breast substitutes, various shifts in oral sadism stages may result.⁶ Note Balinese babies learn to chew on their own ornaments. Here both own and mothers are available.

Perhaps all ethnographers view their notes as a grand dialogue between different levels of observation and theorization. But Mead's notes seem ideal. They converse between methodical observation and theoretical speculation, between minute interaction and cross-cultural comparison, and between a "big picture" of interest to other readers and the immediacy of human experience.

Another fieldnote interpretation is revealing: “Girl, 10. . . sits playing with a string of beads, 1 strand in her mouth but she has taken them off to do this. Watch. Tendency to detach ornaments from own person before playing with them. Another anti-narcissian point” (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 15/17 May 1938). And while observing a girl playing with a koala doll, Mead (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 15/17 August 1938) comments, “good case of treatment of part of body as other-than-self.” These ideas are nowhere embedded in any obvious way in the observational notes themselves. Indeed, the latter comment was paired in the same note with these observations:

. . . sets the doll down and pats herself on both knees.
 . . . takes it up, pats it.
 . . . says “mendinta” [*tokpisin*, or Neo-Melanesian, for “never mind”] of the doll
 . . . pats it.
 . . . puts one hand on its buttocks and pats the back of this hand with her other hand.
 . . . stands it up and pats it (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 15/17 August 1938).

And so forth. Reading these notes is a complex enterprise, tacking between the hectic pace of sensory impressions and a remarkable attention to detail, and the more leisurely yet equally rigorous foray into theories, comparisons, hints, and inter-textual feints (see also Boon 1999:39–41; Lyons and Lyons 1997). There is a unremitting drive to record everything, no matter how minute, and then to try and relate it to something of grand, ethological and eidological importance. It was culture in a nuance or gesture.

Body

Throughout their careers, Bateson and Mead deftly tied norms of infant and childhood social experiences to adult patterns of behavior and activities. For them, the foundations of learning were established in infancy through “. . . the child’s continuous adaptation to movements into which it is guided by the parent who holds it” (Bateson and Mead 1942:16). They anchored cultural patterns of emotion (*ethos*) and cognition (*eidos*) to the body as it moved literally and metaphorically through the lifecycle. Like Marcel Mauss ([1935] 1979), Mead rightly invested considerable importance in “techniques of the body,” especially in regard to emotion and cultural themes. But unlike Mauss, Mead stressed the importance of childhood, socialization, gender, and individual variation in bodily comportment. Mead also studied the pat-

terned continuities of bodily techniques across a broad spectrum of non-contiguous contexts and behaviors. In fact, Sullivan (1999:19) reports that Mead and Bateson considered using *The Anatomy of Culture* as the title of *Balinese Character*. How fitting. Mead's attention to embodiment, and her sensitivity to modes of anthropological representation, recall the hallmarks of contemporary social thought.⁷ But anthropologists today rarely associate these topics with Mead, thus denying her rightful intellectual due and relevance.

Mead and Bateson devised a sophisticated method for capturing and theorizing subtle emotional, cognitive, cultural, social-structural, aesthetic, and temperamental differences cross-culturally (see also Sullivan 1999). This method was literary and visual, and focused, to repeat, on the body. The 1938 fieldnotes represent multiple dimensions of the cultural body and embodied culture: posture, movement, glance, expression, balance, tension, poise, and so forth. These and other aspects of culture—including individual character as per John Dewey, and cultural integration as per Ruth Benedict (Sullivan 1999:19–21)—are not, according to Mead, particularly amenable to mere verbal analysis.⁸

Mead's bodily focus nicely emerges in a passage on the aggressive style of infant bathing among Iatmul. To cleanse their feet, mothers forcefully and matter-of-factly swung children by the arms so their heels skimmed through the water. "Query," asks Mead:

What effect does swinging a baby by its arms. Does it make the arm a more integral part of the trunk or not. Does this holding of young babies in palm of hand and squeezing the chest, tend to pack the child closer and tighter in feeling? Bali, relaxed within an iron frame, Iatmul, a coiled spring limited in action by its tensivity only (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 15/17 May 1938)

Here is a "point to follow up in photography" for May 6/9:

Patterns and importance of interlaced half tensed hand positions, and relationship to finger games which pairs of children play. Whereas a Balinese hand is relaxed in what seem to us distorted and unnatural positions, these peoples hands are put, tensed or half tensed into positions which involve support, either given by the other hand, or by the other hand of another child. Consider: inter-play between two hands with two hands symbolizing different things. . . . Inter-play between two hands being derivative from inter-play between two persons, as children. Watch sex relationship, age, and

which hands used to which, and whether common playing pairs exchanges roles, in active-passive games like finger-pulling (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 6/9 May 1938).

The photos and text of the 1938 fieldnotes, like those in *Balinese Character*, keenly capture the nearly invisible aspects of culture that are expressed through bodily attitudes. Moreover, Mead's focus on the body subtly *de-exoticized* the Balinese and Iatmul by stressing the mundane aspects of a localized humanity—the delicacy of a pose, or the sobs of a child.

Emotion

Often, Mead's prose in the 1938 fieldnotes evokes the emotional tenor of a distant cultural moment. Her literary style reduces cultural differences, or casts these differences into a type of global humanism that, while born of the optimism from an earlier era of American liberalism, still seems timely. After the death of an infant, writes Mead, close kin display:

... a kind of simple tenderness for the potential personality of the dead baby, it had a fine nose, it had its ears pierced now but if it had lived they would have been pierced much later, 'I though you would stay and grow big' the father said. The ritual was also simple and personal

... the little rite of the mother giving it her breast

... was inexpressingly touching. ... There was no horror and no fear and no attempt to escape from the realities of the situation (LOC: MMP, Fieldnotes, 5/7 June 1938; see also Mead [1977:234]).

The mother, to paraphrase the rest of the note, cradled her child, stroking its face, her tears falling to its little body. She placed her breast into the child's mouth, and then laid her infant into the grave. While Mead embraced the canons of anthropological science and its imperative to record events, her analytic gaze was hardly dispassionate. It encompassed, again and again, "inexpressingly touching" qualities. Mead uses a scene of unimaginable tragedy to reach out to a common humanity.⁹

Truth

Today, Mead's innovations and outlook are often eclipsed by debates surrounding the brute facticity of ethnographic data. Yet the 1938 fieldnotes, in my reading, expand beyond positivist dichotomies of "correct" and "wrong."

In Samoa, some critics say, Mead was fooled by young girls. Then, in Bali, she was again misled, this time by informants who were far more politically and historically aware than Mead, and so feared the wrath of colonial administrators. Little in the 1938 notes support these accusations. They present Mead as a gifted fieldworker.

Mead highlighted individual biographies. She recorded the anthropologists' involvement in daily affairs of the village. Hers was no veranda-style ethnography. Mead and Bateson subscribed neither to ethnographic omniscience, nor to cultural homogeneity and anonymity. Ironically, the famous photo of the "mosquito room" portrays local people as peripheral, peering in on the cloistered anthropologists.¹⁰ But most of Bateson's photos of Mead depict something quite different: Mead interacting directly with the people of Tambunum village in their day-to-day affairs.

I am sketching a moral portrait of Mead to counteract those anthropologists who casually, sometimes ridiculously, rebuke her method and writing. For example, Pollmann (1990) dismisses *Balinese Character* as colonial fiction. Romy (1996:145–147) scorns Mead's romantic pen, like the "cool medical eye" of Bateson's camera, for pathologizing the Balinese as schizophrenic. And Lakoff (1996) draws on Foucault to liken Mead's "posture and personality" perspective to Jeremy Bentham's infamous panopticon, a prison that allows for the continuous surveillance of inmates who are unable to see their seer. Doubtless, one could also read Mead's Iatmul as a Hobbesian alternative to the Rousseauistic Balinese (but at least not schizoid), or see Mead as infantilizing other cultures by suggesting that anthropology might have something to teach Americans about raising children. But these are partial truths, at best, intended mainly to showcase the critic's own sense of moral importance, and not very interesting ones.

Lacking in this censure is any sense for the elegance, subtlety, and humanism of Mead's anthropology—in spite of the colonial setting. Ironically, most critiques of Mead promote an ethical vision of anthropology that can be directly traced to Mead: diffusing authority; experimenting with voice, gaze, and genre; blurring the boundary between Science and Humanism; embracing cultural diversity; and attending to the little-noticed toils and triumphs of everyday life.

Long before I arrived in Tambunum, the river washed away the famous "mosquito room." But Mead and Bateson remain a constant presence in the village, and not merely the stuff of nostalgia. Eastern Iatmul read their books, delight in viewing the old photos, and even display a letter by Mead to a magistrate during a legal land dispute. Villagers often compared my own research to Mead and Bateson. Pacific anthropologists should do likewise, not for flattery or justification, but to learn about the possibilities for the discipline.

NOTES

Fieldwork funding in 1988–1990 was provided by a Fulbright Award and the Institute for Intercultural Studies; additional support was granted by the Department of Anthropology and the Graduate School, University of Minnesota. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and DePauw University kindly enabled a return visit in June–August 1994. I also extend my unreciprocated gratitude to the people of Tambunum. Permission to reproduce Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s unpublished notes and the photograph was kindly granted by Mary Catherine Bateson, whose encouragement I also note with appreciation, and the Institute for Intercultural Studies.

1. Among other places, variations of the “mosquito room” photograph appear on the cover of Sanjek’s edited volume on fieldnotes (1990a), and in Banner’s (2003) biography of Mead and Ruth Benedict, as well as in Mead’s books, *Blackberry Winter* (1972:225) and *Letters from the Field* (1977:239).

2. As I read through Mead and Bateson’s unpublished 1938 fieldnotes in the Margaret Mead Papers of the Library of Congress (LOC: MMP), I recorded only the date of the original notes, not the full Box and file classifications. My citations are thus incomplete. I apologize for this omission.

3. These works are largely under-appreciated: e.g., Mead (1937, 1940a, 1940b, 1941, 1943, 1947, 1950, 1952, 1954, 1972); Bateson (1941, 1949); and Mead and Bateson ([1954] 1988).

4. A close colleague of Mead, Rhoda Metraux (1976, 1978), studied in Tambunum during the 1970s.

5. The 1938 fieldnotes are not devoid of the truly mundane (yet truly important to the fieldworker!): “Mrs. Goss’ bread recipe;” the trade value of matches, razors, beads, teaspoons of salt, and fishing hooks; and requisitions that include Palmolive soap, Listerine tooth paste, 500 sticks of trade tobacco, Bicarb soda, and tins of asparagus, Bovril beef spread, Holbrooks mango chutney, Cadbury’s Chocolate, Mortons dates, St. George oysters, Arnotts biscuits, Campbells soups, Colman’s mustard, Vienna sausages, as well as Victoria Bitter, Green Chartreuse, two decanters of King George whiskey, and a .32 Browning Automatic pistol.

6. Iatmul babies “cut their teeth” on their mothers’ shell ornaments (Mead [1949] 1968:163).

7. Lutkehaus (1995:195) makes the same point in regard to Mead’s ([1949] 1968) *Male and Female*.

8. For the role of Benedict in Mead’s thought, as well as the famous Sepik imbroglio of Mead, Reo Fortune, and Bateson, see Banner (2003), Bateson (1936), Boon (1984, 1985, 1999), and Lipset (1982:138).

9. Gewertz and Errington (2002:10) look to Mead when concluding their stirring account of a Chambri funeral performed for their own daughter:

We came to recognize that the unsettling and often wrenching challenge Margaret Mead has set for us all, to contextualize and compare culturally embedded lives, might serve everyone well in these troubled times.

10. The famous photo is one of a series taken by Bateson of himself and Mead at their typewriters in the “mosquito room,” separately and together. In some of the photos, one can just make out the remote in Bateson’s right hand.

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