

CULTURE SHOCK IN PARADISE

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When I became a charter member of Alpha chapter of Lambda Alpha in 1968, I was nearing the completion of my undergraduate degree in anthropology. Fieldwork was something I knew about only through reading and from hearing about the experiences of my professors; personal participation in such an adventure seemed an unlikely possibility. As a 32-year old widow with two young children, I had given little serious thought to becoming a "real" anthropologist. With a little encouragement from some of my professors, I made the decision to enter graduate school to work toward a Masters of Arts degree. By the time I accomplished this goal, I was clearly committed to anthropology as the only profession for me. And so at the age of 36 I entered a Ph.D. program.

I negotiated the course work easily enough, but there remained the question of fieldwork. My interests were in Polynesia, but my children had now turned into teenagers and the prospect of venturing to the South Seas seemed complex, if not impossible. A non-anthropological but academic job opportunity presented itself, so I began working and waited as the teenagers grew older and somewhat more responsible. And then a colleague/friend (who was not then but is now my husband) received a grant to return to Samoa to assess the

impact of modernization on the aged in that society, and there was money to take a research associate along-me.

By this time my children were old enough so they could be left at home and this did not make them unhappy. Since I had a faculty position in a gerontology program, the research topic pleased the director, and the fieldwork opportunity would allow me to complete my degree and thereby improve my job security. So here I was: going to American Samoa, a territory of the United States for many years, where most people speak English, where the total culture has been well-documented, where health risks are few and the climate pleasant, and in the company of a seasoned fieldworker, well-acquainted with Samoans and their culture. What could be more ideal?

In retrospect, it really was ideal. I, however, did not respond ideally. Culture shock set in soon and continued or recurred throughout much of the research period. It was not that I did not expect culture shock; like all students of anthropology I had read and heard much about this phenomenon. Perhaps it is a bit like having a child: the impending arrival is known well in advance and occupies much of the prospective parents' thoughts, but they may not think about what their life will be like after the birth of the child. Anticipating culture shock may not include the realistic consideration of a long-term adjustment process.

I was aware of a variety of "primitive" field conditions, but my field setting was hardly in that category. Upon arrival I found the islands of American Samoa in the process of modernizing American-style, and this included electricity, paved roads (at least on the main island), telephones, an air-conditioned hotel, restaurants, a bank, supermarkets, busses for local travel, regular air service to nearby islands and major South Sea ports, and a hospital staffed by U.S. public health doctors. How much adjustment could be required in such a place? This was my naive view upon entering the field, and therein lay a major problem.

The tropical paradise I expected was in many ways just that -- spectacular scenery, lush vegetation, colorful flowers and houses. On the other hand, in the government center in the areas away from the main road there was a dense jumble of houses, some quite dilapidated, rocky streets and paths, water pipes running above ground, perennial mud puddles -- in all, a depressing site in comparison with the outlying villages.

My more traumatic experiences started at the bank, which was a branch of the Bank of Hawaii. We thought it wise to establish accounts for the time we were to be there. It was a very modern-looking bank and the personnel were very pleasant. After a lengthy wait, someone helped us with the necessary paperwork. We needed cash immediately, but it was bank policy to allow no withdrawals until checks deposited into the account initially had cleared, a process that would take about two weeks since we were 6,000 miles from home.

After talking with a series of bank officials and explaining our problem, we finally succeeded in getting the necessary money. As we walked out of the bank two hours after entering, we resolved that on future research trips to this country, we would use a cashier's check to establish an account.

An even more disconcerting event for me occurred the day we picked up our personalized checks. Imprinted on the checks with the lovely South Sea background design was my name with the wrong middle initial. When I expressed concern about the inaccuracy to the young Samoan woman she simply responded, "You can just sign them that way!" It now seems very funny to me, but at the time I was overwhelmed. What kind of system was this? My solution was to make the correction on each check and to use the checks only for withdrawing cash from the bank.

This incident was soon followed by a surprise of a different sort. Because our research plan involved moving to several different locales within the islands, we spent our time on the main island (Tutuila) in the hotel, which proved to be a very nice facility. In addition to several large two-story structures, there were also some small two-unit buildings located along the waterfront and designed like traditional Samoan fale (houses) but more enclosed. We rented one of these, and all went well for the first few weeks. Then one night I went into the bathroom and confronted a rat peeking from behind the toilet. Neither the rat nor I knew which way to go, but I made a strange

sound of fright and the rat decided to run out of the bathroom, across the bedroom, up the drapes, and then disappeared. I slept very little the rest of that night. Then within a day or so one of the resident geckos (small lizards that help control the mosquito population) lost its footing and fell off the ceiling onto my bed. Things were definitely closing in on me and an entry in my notebook reflected my feelings:

There is this problem that might seem ridiculous to those who have done fieldwork under real primitive (in the sense of undeveloped) conditions. One would expect things to be easy -- even soft -- in a somewhat Americanized society, living in a hotel, and with access to a number of modern conveniences. What is true is that while there is all this stuff, nothing works very well. The phone book is two years old and half the pages are missing, and the phone system itself is incredible. It is a rare to make contact with the person you wish to reach by phone. The hotel is o.k. if you don't mind rats and lizards that persist in coming inside. The ground transportation is o.k. considering there's no place we need to go. You try to send a cable thinking it will be easier than calling overseas and the message is mis-typed. Perhaps it's easier to adjust to a field situation where there is no expectation of real modernization as we understand it. Then anything you find is a bonus. When you know the conveniences are there, there's a tendency to expect things to work. And when they don't it is doubly frustrating -- especially when the humidity is about 90%.

It was about this time that my co-worker remarked that just possibly I was too old to be doing fieldwork in a foreign setting for the first time. Was he right? Was this my midlife crisis? I was 41 at the time, and perhaps I was less flexible than a younger person might have been. Perhaps I felt that it was more important to be successful -- to

prove that I could succeed as well as a younger student. In any case, it was obvious that I was suffering from culture shock complete with depression, anger and periodic tears.

Interisland transportation was another source of trauma. The local airline provided service to the Manu'a island group which was about 60 miles east of Tutuila, and also to Western Samoa. The difference was that service to Western Samoa was much more predictable since it was classified as international travel. Within the American territory, however, there was no requirement for adherence to a strict schedule. Part of our research was to be done on Ta'u island in Manu'a, and while we could go by either boat or plane, we had decided to fly. Getting information about when and where one purchased tickets was somewhat difficult, but we eventually asked enough questions of enough people to solve the problem.

The day of our planned departure for Ta'u the flight was cancelled because of bad weather, and the next day the weather was equally dismal -- rainy and completely overcast. Since there was no weather station on Ta'u, the pilot had to guess about actual conditions. In midafternoon the decision was made to make a flight. He would land if possible, and return to Tutuila if not. The plane was a twin-engine, fixed landing-gear craft and weight was a critical issue. Passengers and baggage are weighed and adjustments made in either passenger load or baggage as needed. On this day the cargo included a large quantity of melting ice cream destined for the upcoming White Sunday celebration a few

days later. As the skinniest passenger, I was directed to the seat in the tail section of the plane, behind several obese Samoan women and children. My colleague, as you might have guessed, was given the co-pilot's seat. From my vantage point, I had a clear view of all the rusting rivets on the plane's wings, which, along with the weather was not reassuring.

The flight was not such a long one, although it seemed so to me. We were able to make a scheduled stop on the Manu'an island of Ofu, which had a gravel landing strip. The remainder of the flight to Ta'u took only a few minutes. After a pass over the grass landing strip, with coconut trees at one end and a cliff dropping off to the ocean at the other, the pilot decided to land. Regardless of wind direction the landing at this field always had to be made toward the trees. I could hardly believe my reaction as we approached the ground; I had found the trip so unnerving that the prospect of being back on land again outweighed any other consideration, and I found myself thinking, "So we hit the trees, how bad can that be?" Several weeks later as we watched the plane land on the day we planned to return to Tutuila, it really did lose brake power and run into the bush. No one was injured, but the damage to the plane effectively cancelled air service between Manu'a and Tutuila for a time. For us this meant remaining a few days longer and returning by boat, giving me the opportunity to

experience yet another form of transportation available to the natives of American Samoa.

There was no dock on Ta'u so passengers had to be ferried out through the reef in a surf boat to the vessel which would transport us to Tutuila. This process requires that one wade out into the water to a depth of two feet or so carrying shoes and other belongings and somehow hoist oneself into the surf boat. Fortunately I was unceremoniously but securely carried and lifted into the boat with little effort by a Samoan man. The islanders rowed out to the larger boat, where the wave action and lack of a long enough boarding ladder presented another real challenge. One of our traveling companions was an American biologist who had also been conducting research on the island. With him was a live snake he had found a few days earlier; it was in a cloth bag which he placed on the deck for the trip. Quite literally the very thought of snakes has always given me a creepy feeling, and here I was sitting on a box with a snake about a foot away for the entire six hour trip. I knew I had reached a new phase of adjustment to fieldwork.

A critical event had occurred during our work in Ta'u, which probably served in some sense as a turning point in my experiences with culture shock. We were living right next door to the dispensary, a nice-looking relatively new building. It was normally staffed by a local Samoan licensed practical nurse, but a doctor completing a residency in Samoa accompanied the regular doctor on his

trip to Ta'u during our stay here, and we had an opportunity to visit with him at length. We had already learned from the palagi (white) school teachers that medical care was very limited on Ta'u and the doctor further confirmed that. He told us that the radio at the dispensary did not work -- this was the means by which they would normally contact Ofu if the interisland boat needed to be recalled after leaving Ta'u. He also indicated that the lab equipment was insufficient for any diagnostic tests -- there was a microscope, covered with cobwebs and with no slides to use with it. Some of the instruments appeared not to have been unwrapped in a long time, if ever. Our friends had told us that although a doctor is supposed to be there part of each month, that had not been the case during the past year. Seriously ill people are also supposed to be flown to the hospital on Tutuila at government expense, but this assumes that the plane is operational, the weather is good, etc. I was quite distressed about this situation and got very angry.

After writing my reactions into my notebook, I discussed them (complete with tearful outbursts) with my colleague. He suggested that perhaps it was not as bad in the local people's view as it appeared to me. He also expressed a feeling that I was fighting the system -- that I was coming face to face with the force of culture and that the sooner I could come to terms with the variance in my view and theirs, the sooner I would be on my way. He reminded me of the fatalistic world view of Samoans, of which I had already seen some evidence.

As I thought about this, I began to see that my reaction was based on an assumption that, because the American government had been in control of these islands for so long and had deliberately introduced most of the changes that had occurred, that the people had obviously been misled about the quality of services available to them. Presumably the changes were to improve the conditions in the country and yet nothing worked quite as it should, if at all. I was upset and I thought the Samoan people had every reason to be upset also. Quite clearly I was also assuming that the Samoan people had the same expectations of the system that I did. And somewhere in the back of my mind was a conflict about saying, "These people just don't care," which suggested to me that I was being ethnocentric.

I had to admit that I had never seen people for whom "God's will" was a prevailing explanation for almost anything that occurred. It was certainly borne out in some of their actions, e.g., a woman who had an eye infection but would not walk the short distance to the dispensary to see the doctor, and therefore lost the sight in her eye. Or there was the young man who stepped on a nail and was told he should go to the hospital in Tutuila for further treatment, but who refused to board the plane when it arrived. When he did decide to go, it was too late and he died in the hospital shortly thereafter. Such occurrences may well attest to lack of faith in a foreign medical system, and in the boy's case, may seem to provide evidence

that it does not work anyway. I was having a struggle with being relativistic, and yet that was what was required.

As for the banking system lots of Samoans patronize the bank, but many used it primarily for cashing paychecks or remittance checks from relatives overseas. Savings accounts have not traditionally been popular in that society because the support patterns of the Samoan extended family almost guarantee that anyone with a nest egg will be expected to share it with relatives. This monetary institution probably did not play the part in their lives that it normally did in mine.

It would not be fair to suggest that Samoans had no expectations of foreign technological developments in their country, but that they no doubt had very different expectations than I did at that time. And given the way things worked, they were at an advantage. Once I began to accept unpredictability in certain situations as given, I was less anguished about life in the islands and consequently happier for the remainder of our fieldwork.

Most of the last six weeks of the research project were spent in Western Samoa, an independent country but culturally very similar to American Samoa. In spite of its larger population and greater land mass, this country is much poorer economically than the American territory and in the late 1970's, remained much more traditional in many respects. There were adjustments to be made in moving there, but I found it easier making the transition. I approached it more as a foreign country and had fewer expectations -- I was more

pen-minded, so to speak -- than when I arrived in American Samoa. Whether it was the open-minded stance or the fact that I had finally overcome my culture shock that explained the difference, I do not know. And I still do not know if, or how much, my being an older novice at fieldwork affected my response. But I have two conclusions about my own experience with culture shock: (1) I doubt that any one of us can convey adequately to an inexperienced fieldworker the formula for preventing culture shock; and (2) that, at least in my case, the remedy for this malady was learning to "go with the flow" of the culture, and perhaps that's one of the purposes of fieldwork after all.

By the time I returned home I was convinced that my field experiences had taught me so much about adaptation to change and about differences in what is considered important vs. trivial that nothing would perturb me in the future. But of course, one gets over that and has to readjust to one's own culture again, a process that not infrequently involves reverse culture shock!

