

Coming of Age in Samoa

A STUDY OF ADOLESCENCE
AND SEX IN PRIMITIVE
SOCIETIES

BY

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PENGUIN BOOKS

The Girl and Her Age Group

UNTIL a child is six or seven at least she associates very little with her contemporaries. Brothers and sisters and small cousins who live in the same household, of course, frolic and play together; but outside the household each child clings closely to its older guardian, and comes in contact with other children only in cases when the little nursemaids are friends. But at about seven years of age, the children begin to form larger groups, a kind of voluntary association which never exists in later life – that is, a group recruited from both relationship and neighbourhood groups. These are strictly divided along sex lines, and antagonism between the small girls and the small boys is one of the salient features of the group life. The little girls are just beginning to ‘be ashamed’ in the presence of older brothers, and the prohibition that the small girl must never join a group of boys is beginning to be enforced. The fact that the boys are less burdened and so can range further afield in search of adventure, while the girls have to carry their heavy little charges with them, also makes a difference between the sexes. The groups of small children which hang about the fringes of some adult activity often contain both girls and boys, but here the selection principle is simply age discrimination on the part of their elders, rather than voluntary association on the children’s part.

These age gangs are usually confined to the children who live in eight or ten contiguous households.¹ They are flexible associations, the members of which manifest a vivid hostility towards their contemporaries in neighbouring villages and sometimes towards other gangs within their own

¹ See Neighbourhood Maps. Appendix 1, page 199.

village. Blood ties cut across these neighbourhood alignments, so that a child may be on good terms with members of two or three different groups. A strange child from another group, provided she came alone, could usually take refuge beside a relative. But the little girls of Siufaga looked askance at the little girls of Lumā, the nearest village, and both looked with even greater suspicion at the little girls from Faleasao, who lived twenty minutes' walk away. However, heart-burnings over these divisions were very temporary affairs. When Tua's brother was ill, her entire family moved from the far end of Siufaga into the heart of Lumā. For a few days Tua hung rather dolefully about the house, only to be taken in within a week by the central Lumā children with complete amiability. But when she returned some weeks later to Siufaga, she became again 'a Siufaga girl', object elect of institutionalized scorn and gibes to her recent companions.

No very intense friendships are made at this age. The relationship and neighbourhood structure of the group overshadows the personalities within it. Also the most intense affection is always reserved for near relatives, and pairs of little sisters take the place of chums. The Western comment, 'Yes, Mary and Julia are such good friends as well as sisters!' becomes in Samoa, 'But she is a relative,' if a friendship is commented upon. The older ones fend for the younger, give them their spoils, weave them flower necklaces, and give them their most treasured shells. This relationship aspect is the only permanent element in the group, and even this is threatened by any change of residence. The emotional tone attached to the inhabitants of a strange village tends to make even a well-known cousin seem a little strange.

Of the different groups of little girls there was only one which showed characteristics which would make it possible to classify it as a gang. An accident of residence accounts for the most intense group development being in the centre

of Lumā, where nine little girls of nearly the same age and with abundant relationship ties lived close together. The development of a group which played continually together and maintained a fairly coherent hostility towards outsiders, seems to be more of a function of residence than of the personality of any child particularly endowed with powers of leadership. The nine little girls in this group were less shy, less suspicious, more generous towards one another, more socially enterprising than other children of the same age, and in general reflected the socializing effects of group life. Outside this group, the children of this age had to rely much more upon their immediate relationship group, reinforced perhaps by the addition of one or two neighbours. Where the personality of a child stood out it was more because of exceptional home environment than a result of social give-and-take with children of her own age.

Children of this age had no group activities except play, in direct antithesis to the home life, where the child's only function was work – baby-tending and the performance of numerous trivial tasks and innumerable errands. They forgathered in the early evening, before the late Samoan supper, and occasionally during the general siesta hour in the afternoon. On moonlight nights they scoured the villages alternately attacking or fleeing from the gangs of small boys, peeping through drawn shutters, catching land crabs, ambushing wandering lovers, or sneaking up to watch a birth or a miscarriage in some distant house. Possessed by a fear of the chiefs, a fear of small boys, a fear of their relatives, and by a fear of ghosts, no gang of less than four or five dared to venture forth on these nocturnal excursions. They were veritable groups of little outlaws escaping from the exactions of routine tasks. Because of the strong feeling for relationship and locality, the part played by stolen time, the need for immediately executed group plans, and the punishment which hung over the heads of children who got

too far out of earshot, the Samoan child was as dependent upon the populousness of her immediate locality as is the child in a rural community in the West. True, her isolation here was never one-eighth of a mile in extent, but glaring sun and burning sands, coupled with the number of relatives to be escaped from in the day or the number of ghosts to be escaped from at night, magnified this distance until as a barrier to companionship it was equivalent to three or four miles in rural America. Thus there occurred the phenomenon of the isolated child in a village full of children of her own age. Such was Luna, aged ten, who lived in one of the scattered houses belonging to a high chief's household. This house was situated at the very end of the village where she lived with her grandmother, her mother's sister Sami, Sami's husband and baby, and two younger maternal aunts, aged seventeen and fifteen. Luna's mother was dead. Her other brothers and sisters lived on another island with her father's people. She was ten, but young for her age, a quiet, listless child, reluctant to take the initiative, the sort of child who would always need an institutionalized group life. Her only relatives close by were two girls of fourteen, whose long legs and absorption in semi-adult tasks made them far too grown-up companions for her. Some little girls of fourteen might have tolerated Luna about, but not Selu, the younger of the cousins, whose fine mat was already three feet under way. In the next house, a stone's throw away, lived two little girls, Pimi and Vana, aged eight and ten. But they were not relatives, and being chief baby-tenders to four younger children, they had no time for exploring. There were no common relatives to bring them together, and so Luna lived a solitary life, except when an enterprising young aunt of eleven came home to her mother's house. This aunt, Siva, was a fascinating companion, a vivid and precocious child, whom Luna followed about in open-mouthed astonishment. But Siva had proved too much of a handful

for her widowed mother, and the *matai*, her uncle, had taken her to live in his immediate household at the other end of the village, on the other side of the central Lumā gang. They formed far more attractive companions, and Siva seldom got as far as her mother's house in her occasional moments of freedom. So unenterprising Luna cared for her little cousin, followed her aunt and grandmother about and most of the time presented a very forlorn appearance.

In strong contrast was the fate of Lusi, who was only seven, too young to be really eligible for the games of her ten- and eleven-year-old elders. Had she lived in an isolated spot, she would have been merely a neighbourhood baby. But her house was in a strategic position, next door to that of her cousins, Maliu and Pola, important members of the Lumā gang. Maliu, one of the oldest members of the group, had a tremendous feeling for all her young relatives, and Lusi was her first cousin. So tiny, immature Lusi had the full benefit of a group life denied to Luna.

At the extreme end of Siufaga lived Vina, a gentle, unassuming girl of fourteen. Her father's house stood all alone in the centre of a grove of palm trees, just out of sight and earshot of the nearest neighbour. Her only companions were her first cousin, a reserved, capable eighteen-year old, and two cousins of seventeen and nineteen. There was one little cousin of twelve also in the neighbourhood, but five younger brothers and sisters kept her busy. Vina also had several brothers and sisters younger than herself, but they were old enough to fend for themselves, and Vina was comparatively free to follow the older girls on fishing expeditions. So she never escaped from being the little girl, tagging after older ones, carrying their loads, and running their errands. She was a flurried, anxious child, over-concerned with pleasing others, docile in her chance encounters with contemporaries from long habit of docility. A free give-and-take relationship within her own age group had been denied

to her and was now denied to her for ever. For it was only to the eight- to twelve-year old girl that this casual group association was possible. As puberty approached, and a girl gained physical strength and added skill, her household absorbed her again. She must make the oven, she must go to work on the plantation, she must fish. Her days were filled with long tasks and new responsibilities.

Such a child was Fitu. In September she was one of the dominant members of the gang, a little taller than the rest, a little lankier, more strident and executive, but very much a harum-scarum little girl among little girls, with a great baby always on her hip. But by April she had turned the baby over to a younger sister of nine; the still younger baby was entrusted to a little sister of five, and Fitu worked with her mother on the plantations, or went on long expeditions after the hibiscus bark, or for fish. She took the family washing to the sea and helped make the oven on cooking days. Occasionally in the evening she slipped away to play games on the green with her former companions, but usually she was too tired from the heavy unaccustomed work and also a slight strangeness had crept over her. She felt that her more adult activities set her off from the rest of the group with whom she had felt so much at home the autumn before. She made only abortive attempts to associate with the older girls in the neighbourhood. Her mother sent her to sleep in the pastor's house next door, but she returned home after three days. Those girls were all too old, she said. 'Laititi a'u' ('I am but young'). And yet she was spoiled for her old group. The three villages numbered fourteen such children, just approaching puberty, preoccupied by unaccustomed tasks and renewed and closer association with the adults of their families, not yet interested in boys, and so forming no new alliances in accordance with sex interests. Soberly they perform their household tasks, select a teacher from the older women of their family, learn to bear the

suffix, meaning 'little', dropped from the 'little girl' which had formerly described them. But they never again amalgamate into such free-and-easy groups as the before-the-teens gang. As sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls, they will still rely upon relatives, and the picture is groupings of twos or of threes, never more. The neighbourhood feelings drop out, and girls of seventeen will ignore a near neighbour who is an age mate and go the length of the village to visit a relative. Relationship and similar sex interests are now the deciding factor in friendship. Girls also followed passively the stronger allegiance of the boys. If a girl's sweetheart has a chum who is interested in a cousin of hers, the girls strike up a lively, but temporary, friendship. Occasionally such friendships even go outside the relationship group.

Although girls may confide only in one or two girl relatives, their sex status is usually sensed by the other women of the village, and alliances shift and change on this basis, from the shy adolescent who is suspicious of all older girls, to the girl whose first or second love affair still looms as very important, to the girls who are beginning to centre all their attention upon one boy and possible matrimony. Finally the unmarried mother selects her friends, when possible, from those in like case with herself, or from women of ambiguous marital position, deserted or discredited young wives.

Very few friendships of younger for older girls cut across these groupings after puberty. The twelve-year-old may have a great affection and admiration for her sixteen-year-old cousin (although any of these enthusiasms for older girls are pallid matters compared to a typical school-girl 'crush' in our civilization). But when she is fifteen and her cousin nineteen, the picture changes. All the adult and near-adult world is hostile, spying upon her love affairs in its more circumspect sophistication, supremely not to be trusted. No one is to be trusted who is not immediately engaged in similarly hazardous adventures.

It may be safely said that without the artificial conditions produced by residence in the native pastor's household or in the large missionary boarding school, the girls do not go outside their relationship group to make friends. (In addition to the large girls' boarding school which served all of American Samoa, the native pastor of each community maintained a small informal boarding school for boys and girls. To these schools were sent the girls whose fathers wished to send them later to the large boarding school, and also girls whose parents wished them to have three or four years of the superior educational advantages and stricter supervision of the pastor's home.) Here unrelated girls live side by side, sometimes for years. But as one of the two defining features of a household is common residence, the friendships formed between girls who have lived in the pastor's household are not very different psychologically from the friendships of cousins or girls connected only by affinity who live in the same family. The only friendships which really are different in kind from those formed by common residence or membership in the same relationship group are the institutionalized relationships between the wives of chiefs and the wives of talking chiefs. But these friendships can be understood only in connexion with the friendships among boys and men.

The little boys follow the same pattern as do the little girls, running in a gang based upon the double bonds of neighbourhood and relationship. The feeling for the ascendancy of age is always much stronger than in the case of girls, because the older boys do not withdraw into their family groups as do the girls. The fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys gang together with the same freedom as do the twelve-year-olds. The borderline between small boys and bigger boys is therefore a continually shifting one, the boys in an intermediate position now lording it over the younger boys now tagging obsequiously in the wake of their elders.

There are two institutionalized relationships between boys which are called by the same name and possibly were at one time one relationship. This is the *soa*, the companion at circumcision and the ambassador in love affairs. Boys are circumcised in pairs, making the arrangements themselves and seeking out an older man who has acquired a reputation for skilfulness. There seems to be here simply a logical inter-relationship of cause and effect; a boy chooses a friend (who is usually also a relative) as his companion and the experience shared binds them closer together. There were several pairs of boys in the village who had been circumcised together and were still inseparable companions, often sleeping together in the house of one of them. Casual homo sexual practices occurred in such relationships. However, when the friendships of grown boys of the village were analysed, no close correspondence with the adolescent allegiance was found, and older boys were as often found in groups of three or four as in pairs.

When a boy is two or three years past puberty, his choice of a companion is influenced by the convention that a young man seldom speaks for himself in love and never in a proposal of marriage. He accordingly needs a friend of about his age whom he can trust to sing his praises and press his suit with requisite fervour and discretion. For this office, a relative, or, if the affair be desperate, several relatives are employed. A youth is influenced in his choice by his need of an ambassador who is not only trustworthy and devoted but plausible and insinuating as a procurer. This *soa* relationship is often, but not necessarily, reciprocal. The expert in love comes in time to dispense with the services of an intermediary, wishing to taste to the full the sweets of all the stages in courtship. At the same time his services are much in demand by others, if they entertain any hope at all of his dealing honourably by his principal.

But the boys have also other matters besides love-making

in which they must cooperate. Three are needed to man a bonito canoe; two usually go together to lasso eels on the reef; work on the communal taro plantations demands the labour of all the youths in the village. So that while a boy too chooses his best friends among his relatives, his sense of social solidarity is always much stronger than that of a girl. The *auluma*, the organization of young girls and wives of untitled men, is an exceedingly loose association gathered for very occasional communal work, and still more occasional festivities. In villages where the old intricacies of the social organization are beginning to fall into disuse, it is the *auluma* which disappears first, while the *aumaga*, the young men's organization, has too important a place in the village economy to be thus ignored. The *aumaga* is indeed the most enduring social factor in the village. The *matais* meet more formally and spend a great deal of time in their own households, but the young men work together during the day, feast before and after their labours, are present as a serving group at all meetings of the *matais*, and when the day's work is over, dance and go courting together in the evening. Many of the young men sleep in their friends' houses, a privilege but grudgingly accorded the more chaperoned girls.

Another factor which qualifies men's relationships is the reciprocal relationship between chiefs and talking chiefs. The holders of these two classes of titles are not necessarily related, although this is often the case, as it is considered an advantage to be related to both ranks. But the talking chiefs are major-domos, assistants, ambassadors, henchmen, and councillors of their chiefs, and these relationships are often foreshadowed among the young men, the heirs-apparent or the heirs aspirant to the family titles.

Among women there are occasional close alliances between the *taupo* and the daughter of her father's principal talking chief. But these friendships always suffer from their

temporary character; the *taupo* will inevitably marry into another village. And it is rather between the wife of the chief and the wife of a talking chief that the institutionalized and lifelong friendship exists. The wife of the talking chief acts as assistant, adviser, and mouthpiece for the chief's wife and in turn counts upon the chief's wife for support and material help. It is a friendship based upon reciprocal obligations having their origins in the relationship between the women's husbands, and it is the only women's friendship which oversteps the limits of the relationship and affinity group. Such friendships based on an accident of marriage and enjoined by the social structure should hardly be classed as voluntary. And within the relationship group itself, friendship is so patterned as to be meaningless. I once asked a young married woman if a neighbour with whom she was always upon the most uncertain and irritated terms was a friend of hers. 'Why, of course, her mother's father's father and my father's mother's father were brothers.' Friendship based on temperamental congeniality was a most tenuous bond, subject to shifts of interest and to shifts of residence, and a woman came to rely more and more on the associates to whose society and interest blood and marriage entitled her.

Association based upon age as a principle may be said to have ceased for the girls before puberty, owing to the exceedingly individual nature of their tasks and the need for secrecy in their amatory adventures. In the case of the boys, greater freedom, a more compelling social structure, and continuous participation in cooperative tasks, bring about an age-group association which lasts through life. This grouping is influenced but not determined by relationship, and distorted by the influence of rank, prospective rank in the case of youth, equal rank but disproportionate age in the case of older men.