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Margaret Mead and the Death of Alexis Gewertz Shepard

By Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington

When anthropologists Gewertz and Errington told Chambri friends that Alexis had died in an accident, they were summoned to Papua New Guinea for a moving—and difficult—ritual of mourning.

In *Cultural Alternatives and a Feminist Anthropology* (1987), we asked what would have been, for Margaret Mead, an important comparative question: What, of general significance to the lives of American women, and of particular significance to the life of Alexis, Deborah's daughter and Fred's stepdaughter, had we learned from our restudy of the Chambri of Papua New Guinea? (Margaret Mead first described the Chambri as the "Tchambuli" in *Sex and Temperament* [1935], her comparison of gender relations in three Papua New Guinea societies and in the United States.) To be sure, we would phrase the contrast between "us" and "them" far less sharply now, but we would still hold that bringing differently positioned if historically intertwined lives into conjunction can further understanding: can clarify and serve not only our lives but the lives of all involved.

If the contrast between the Chambri and ourselves was intended to be significant to Alexis as she contemplated her life's possibilities, we certainly had not expected that this contrast would prove significant to



Patrick Yarpap arrives in full regalia to claim preeminence as an ancestral presence.

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us as we contemplated her life's finalities. But when we wrote in the spring of 1998 to some of our Chambri friends to say that our only child had been killed by a truck while riding her bicycle to work, they insisted that we come to Papua New Guinea as soon as possible, preferably with Aaron, her husband. They wanted to perform the first part of the *tsem mijanko*, a ritual designed to "finish worry." After all, Alexis had lived with the Chambri when she was a small child and had visited them as an adolescent. As one Chambri put it, "she had grown big at the hands of Chambri women who worked hard in providing her with food." For this ritual, we were instructed to bring photographs of Alexis and personal items, including some of her clothes.

Interested and intrigued, touched and moved, we decided to give it a go. We would give it our best. We wanted to see what sort of cross-cultural understanding might be possible for us: we wanted to see what we might learn, including what we might feel. We also went with a sense that this was an important transition in a history of our long-term fieldwork with Chambri (since 1974 for Deborah and 1983 for Fred). We had always been aware of asymmetries in our relationships with these people. As outsiders, we had always been somewhat unsettled by them, for they remained, of course, vastly more culturally capable and informed about being Chambri than we were. As insiders, they had always been somewhat unsettled by us, for we could come and go as we pleased in a neo-colonial and modernizing world where we were white and (relatively speaking) rich.

As it worked out, and as we hoped might happen, armed as we were with models of solidarity and *communitas*, we and they did become (at least temporarily) both different kinds of insiders and different kinds of outsiders. Through cross-cultural engagement in a transcultural community of suffering, all of our lives were, in fact, clarified and served—although, as we shall see, not always in ways we might have fully anticipated or welcomed.

Here we will describe the ritual, performed in June 1999, in bare outline. (We presented this ritual in detail in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts* [1991], as it focused on the death of a young Chambri of about Alexis's age.) In so doing, we wish to give recognition to what we think was Margaret Mead's most important legacy: her insistence that Anthropology, through its probing of human similarities, differences and connections, should educate us all; and her insistence that it is personally and politically important to challenge the commonplace understandings of everyday life—to lead lives that are culturally thought-through.

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Some preliminaries: While Alexis had lived with Chambri only twice, we had made many more trips there and, by 1999, we knew quite a lot about the sociocultural circumstances. We knew that (as elsewhere in Papua New Guinea) Chambri social life was a mix of conditional cooperation and strenuous contention. Indeed, we knew that basic to Chambri life was a totemic division of labor (complexly affected by Christianity). In this division of labor, each kin group controlled a different part of the visible and invisible world: different species of fish, birds, and fruits; different intensities and directions of winds and waters; different varieties of protective and malevolent spirits. Each kin group, thus, depended on the others to construct their mutual reality. However, each group, convinced of the centrality of its own contribution, also competed with the others to prevail in that construction. Certainly we expected that the *tsem mijanko* ritual would be characterized by both cooperation and



At dawn, Gewertz, second from left, and her female kin wash off the mud of mourning.

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contention.

We also knew that the ritual would have two phases. First, it would assemble those who had worked hard to bring Alexis into being—to constitute her—whether in providing food or in providing ritual protection. Then, these people would be recompensed for their contributions and dispersed. In this way, the books balanced, Alexis would be moved from the social foreground to the ancestral background. This transformation—transition—would take place principally in a woman's house of those deemed Alexis's maternal line and in the men's house of those deemed her paternal line.

In the woman's house, an effigy, centering on (as it happened) a yellow dress, would be built from her belongings. Women from all three Chambri villages would bring personal items of their own transformed dead to attach to Alexis's effigy. As they mourned throughout the night, their songs would resemble those of Lila Abu-Lughod's Bedouin friends—"haiku-like in form and blues-like in substance" (*Veiled Sentiments*, 1986). (For example, in translation: "Your mother brought you a long way from home to live with Chambri and now you've gone a long way and left her behind to cry"; "You and your friends used to go out to the lake together in one canoe and now there's an empty space where you used to sit.") In the men's house, men from all three villages would play sacred flutes throughout the night. At dawn, Aaron and Fred, followed by Deborah, would be taken to a pool to wash off the mud of mourning, dress in new clothes, accept new baskets filled with betel nut and other everyday necessities and be renamed. Following this, Alexis's effigy would be dismantled and distributed to those whose hands had grown her. Her spirit, still clinging to her yellow dress, would then be escorted briefly to her clan's men's house and, finally,

would be released into the waters of Chambri Lake.



Gewertz and her Chambri friends pay their

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respects to Alexis's yellow dress and other parts of the effigy.

What made us different kinds of outsiders and different kinds of insiders than ever before was that the loss

of an only child—and the end of a kinship line—was recognized by all of us as so momentous as to reconfigure, at least for a while, who we were to each other. Loss and vulnerability (though not necessarily experienced in the same ways) led to a solidarity and a mutual commitment. It mattered to us, in ways that went well beyond ethnographic interest, that things—specifically, the *tsem mijanko*—went right. And the Chambri knew that it mattered to us. They knew that we had come to them at this time because we were taking their claims on Alexis and on us fully seriously. Because we were committing ourselves not only to a set of Chambri activities but to a set of activities that both they and we knew touched us profoundly, some of our asymmetries receded, at least for a while. Disparities in cultural competence, race and wealth seemed no longer as unsettling, or, perhaps more accurately, no longer as unsettling in the same way, at a time when we were all forced to deal with our differences and similarities as never before.

First, we had to deal with Chambri views about life as social commotion. From their perspective, the ritual was not only to close the social books on Alexis by ensuring that no one could make claims on her any longer. It was also to establish new claims on us and others so that life would be reconstituted in all of its contention and cooperation without her. The ritual forced everyone into active social engagement by eliciting claims and counter-claims. No one, other than Alexis, was allowed to sit it out. There was an insistence that living people be socially alive—not be socially inert.

However, while finding such views reasonable—indeed, worth thinking about seriously for our own lives—we found some of the Chambri attempts to activate us unsettling at best. For example: in consultation with our Chambri kin, we had decided that Cherobim Subur, as embodiment of his ancestor, Yambusinay, rather than Patrick Yaratap, as embodiment of his ancestor, Saun, should run the show. Although both would have been ritually appropriate, Subur, it was thought, would be more willing to consult with us as to our wishes. We were hence dismayed and our Chambri kin incensed when nevertheless Yaratap, as Saun, arrived to claim preeminence. In full traditional kit of feathers, foliage and other finery, engaged in fancy footwork while blowing a whistle with every step, Yaratap was literally a show-stopper. The men playing

the flutes were silenced—both actually and cosmologically—by his presence. They refused to begin again, demanding compensation because his ancestrally buttressed appearance (and noise) had shattered the ancestral harmonies of their flutes. As ritual sponsors, we were summoned to what soon promised to be a protracted discussion of ritual protocol and relative priority of ancestral presences. However, since we viewed the occasion as a solemn ceremony of commemoration—and since our time was short but our money, not—we decided to cut through what we saw as the self-aggrandizement typical of Chambri male politics: we decided to pay whatever it took to get matters back on track. It was then that we learned that such events of contention were not just a predictable distraction from the ritual's objective of finishing a worry. They were central to it. In fact, Yapat shook his head with frustration at our lack of appreciation of the spirit—the point—of the game (of life), telling us that we had killed them all (that we had stopped them all dead) with our money.

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The young woman's spirit is returned to the house of her kin.

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Another attempt to activate us occurred shortly after we arrived. Akapina Sai, the mother of Alexis's good Chambri friend, Lucy, attacked Deborah. One of the Chambri women who had worked

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hard so that Alexis might grow up, Akapina demanded to know why Deborah hadn't taken better care of Alexis. And because she hadn't, Akapina continued, we owed her, Akapina, compensation. Akapina's rebuke and demand were upsetting. Suffering deep loss was not enough? We also owed her? Well, maybe we did, given the Chambri belief that people not only sustained, but constituted one another. Indeed, neither Yaratpat nor Akapina was being selfish, as we had first thought: they were just being Chambri selves and, as such, were compelling us to act as comparable selves. But, while we could understand such selves and their demands, we felt them a burden rather than a solace.

Second, we had to deal with Chambri views about public and private grief. In this instance, we took comfort from their recognition that private grief endured, regardless of the various social forms enacted for settling life's affairs. In fact, the *tsem mijanko* was not only designed to assemble those who had constituted Alexis and then to disperse them again; it was also designed to provide a public context for the private expression of grief. Thus, late at night in the men's house, Fred sat with Maliwan, an old friend and accomplished flute player. Since Maliwan had recently lost his eldest son (whose initiation we described in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*), Fred asked him whether the ritual to finish a worry had eliminated his sorrow. Maliwan replied: "Of course not. I am thinking about him tonight as I play the flutes. In fact, I think about him all of the time. I just no longer have any obligations concerning him." Comparably, late at night in the women's house, Deborah sat with the many women who had added to Alexis's effigy the personal items of their own dead (generally of a child, but also of a brother or husband). These women sang their songs for all who had lost. In effect, each had been left alone in her own canoe, but all were now sharing the same canoe of mourning. All were together in a sadness that, at least for that moment, did not socially ramify. It just was.

Third, we had to deal with Chambri views about causation, especially as they pertained to death. For them to take our loss seriously, we would have to accept these views as applicable to our lives in faraway America. To be sure, we had anticipated that Chambri would seek to discover who had been responsible for Alexis's death, but it was painful for us to recount (repeatedly) the circumstances in the kind of detail Chambri wanted. Had we examined her body for sorcery? Did we have photographs of it that we could show them for their expert judgment? How exactly had the "accident" happened? Had the truck driver's attention been

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deflected by sorcery? Had someone been trying to attack the Chambri through us? Had a death settlement been reached? Who must be made to pay? These questions were to establish a social and cosmological inventory indicating the extent and nature of our/their weakness (without which the death would not have taken place) as well as our/their resources for reestablishing strength and viability. However, working hard as we were to maintain our composure, we found the Chambri concern with the physical particularities of the death as well as their righteous indignation at the death difficult to manage. Yet we were also moved when Deborah's Chambri brother, Godfried Kolly, in imbuing the feast food with counter-sorcery spells, included Alexis in a list of Chambri dead to be answered for.

Fourth, we had to deal with Chambri views about Christianity. For us all to become both different kinds of insiders and different kinds of outsiders, some of the chickens of Western encompassment would have to be allowed home to roost. If we were to participate in the *tsem mijanko*, we would also have to participate in Christian services offered to help Alexis enter heaven, where we might all join her one happy day. At these services, Chambri offered fervent prayers, spoke in tongues, writhed in possession and testified that our worshiping with Chambri was proof indeed that God loved all of his children, whether white or black. Thus, we had to accede graciously to Western-derived rituals we found personally dissonant if we were to accept the professed hope for equality.

Fifth, we had to deal with Chambri views about what made life worth living. We found that Alexis's death had shifted our relationship such that, for the first time, Chambri were profoundly sorry for us. As one woman succinctly put it to Deborah: "I used to be jealous of you because you were white and rich. But now that you have lost your only child and have no grandchildren, I am not jealous of you anymore." Chambri had known that American kinship was truncated. Yet, when we confirmed what we had at other times told them—that Alexis was our only child, that Deborah had no siblings and that Fred had only a brother with no children—we could see them recoil as if hit. Chambri were quite literally staggered by the implications of such impoverishment: by the complete lack of support and of continuity. We should, they tried to assuage us, adopt our son-in-law (an idea they liked because he would come to know what Alexis had known about them). Or we should adopt a Chambri child to take back to America with us or, perhaps, we should come and live permanently with them.

These offers encapsulated the final thing we had to deal with (and,

as long-term fieldworkers, must continue to deal with): our suspicion that Chambri were often more readily concerned about and generous to us than, under comparable circumstances (whatever these might be), we would have been concerned about and generous to them.

Our visit to the Chambri for the *tsem mijanko* was, in effect, a probing of the possibilities of the kind of anthropology we learned from Margaret Mead, an anthropology committed to understanding difference, similarity and connection. This probing was facilitated by the extreme nature of the circumstances that brought us there, circumstances which led to something of a shift in the relationship between insiders and outsiders. As Alexis's spirit was placed in a Chambri cosmological background, Chambri and we talked in a manner more direct, searching and revealing than ever before.

From this talk we learned various important things about one another. They learned (in a manner that clarified earlier suppositions) about important aspects of our lives. They learned, for instance, that we, though white and rich, were vulnerable in ways that they were not. We think they found this useful in a world in which, with their social and economic peripherality, their worth seemed threatened. We learned (in a manner that clarified earlier suppositions) about important aspects of their lives. We learned, for instance, that life was commotion, that grief was enduring if eventually private and that histories were twisted such that our lives and theirs were embraced in multiple ways. This we found useful in a personal circumstance in which, with Alexis' death, our professional commitments had seemed drained of significance.

Death should not be proud. That both Chambri and we recognized this as true, and therefore talked and acted and felt together in ways that both acknowledged and attempted to bridge our differences, came to give us solace. But, more importantly, 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.

This article is based on a paper that Deborah B. Gewertz, G. Henry Whitcomb 1874 Professor of Anthropology, presented last November at the Mead Centennial Session of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C. Gewertz and

Frederick Errington, her co-author and husband, who is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at Trinity College, have collaborated on several books about Papua New Guinea, including *Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea: The Telling of Difference* (1999), *Articulating Change in the "Last Unknown"* (1995), *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System* (1991), and *Cultural Alternatives and a Feminist Anthropology: An Analysis of Culturally Constructed Gender Interests in Papua New Guinea* (1991).

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