



Ruth Benedict in 1937.

Benedict, Ruth (1887-1948)

by Linda Rapp

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Ruth Fulton Benedict was among the first American women to study anthropology. She rose to the top of her profession, earning international respect for her insight and scholarship. She is best known for her theory of "patterns of culture" that brought together anthropological, psychological, sociological, and philosophical considerations to explain that human behavior and concepts of deviance are cultural products.

Benedict's family had deep roots in America: their heritage traced back to the *Mayflower*. Subsequent generations had gone into farming, but both of Benedict's parents were college graduates. Her father, Frederick Samuel Fulton, was a surgeon practicing in New York City when Benedict was born on June 5, 1887.

Soon thereafter Dr. Fulton fell ill, and the family moved to the farm of the parents of his wife, Bertrice Shattuck Fulton, near Binghamton, New York, where a second daughter, Margery, was born. Only months later Dr. Fulton died. Benedict was not yet two years old.

To support her children and herself Bertrice Fulton found work as a teacher, first in the neighboring town of Norwich and then in Missouri and Minnesota. Eventually the family returned to their native state when Fulton got a job as a librarian in Buffalo.

Both Fulton sisters were excellent students and received scholarships to a private high school and then to Vassar College, where Ruth Fulton majored in English.

Among the works that she read in her classes were those of Walter Pater, whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in particular spoke to her. Upon finishing it she felt "as if my soul had been given back to me, its eyes wide and eager with new understanding." Pater's belief that one should be "forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy" resonated with the young student.

After her graduation in 1909 Benedict--along with two other Vassar alumnae--had the opportunity to spend a year in Europe thanks to the generosity of a patron of the college. It was her first experience of other cultures, and she reveled in learning about them.

Upon her return to the United States, Benedict spent a year doing social work in New York and then moved to Los Angeles, where she taught at high schools for girls, but neither job brought her professional satisfaction.

During a summer vacation at her grandparents' farm she began a courtship with Stanley Benedict, a biochemist and professor at Cornell Medical College in New York City. The couple wed in June 1914.

The marriage brought Ruth Benedict material security, but life as a suburban housewife left her unfulfilled.

Since her husband did not want her to work outside the home, she envisaged writing a series of biographies of "strong women" beginning with feminists Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and Olive Schreiner. The project was never realized. Benedict completed a lengthy essay on Wollstonecraft but was unable to find a publisher for it. (Margaret Mead included it in *An Anthropologist at Work* [1959], a collection of Benedict's writings.) She did, however, begin publishing poetry under the pseudonyms Ruth Stanhope and Anne Singleton.

The Benedicts' marriage soon crumbled. The couple never divorced but eventually separated.

Seeking an avenue that would allow her to realize her self-worth and, in Pater's inspirational words, "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame," Benedict went back to college in 1918, first spending a year at Columbia and next going to the New School for Social Research, where she began her study of anthropology.

Benedict enrolled in the doctoral program at Columbia in 1921. There she became the student of Franz Boas, then America's most prominent anthropologist. She earned her Ph.D. two years later with a dissertation entitled *The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America*.

Benedict served as Boas's teaching assistant in a course that he offered at Barnard College. There, in 1922, Benedict met and became a mentor of Margaret Mead. The two women also developed a romantic friendship and eventually became lovers. They did not establish a household but occasionally traveled together.

Biographer Margaret M. Caffrey states that it "is difficult to say what pertains to the Mead-Benedict relationship in Benedict's poems because of their inherent concealment and mixture of actual experience and the play of imagination," but she finds that several speak to relevant issues. "Reprieve" addresses a difference in age (Mead was fifteen years Benedict's junior). Several poems deal with the idea of permanence in love, which Benedict valued, whereas Mead, according to Caffrey, "had a pattern of falling in love with more than one person at a time."

Some poems express the danger that love between women may lead to their being outcast by society, but the joyful and sensuous "For the Hour after Love" concludes by asking what can "compete / With sleep begotten of a woman's kiss?"

Although their physical relationship ended, Benedict and Mead remained lifelong friends, bound by deep personal affection and the utmost professional respect.

After receiving her doctorate Benedict had hoped to be appointed to the teaching position at Barnard College that Boas was about to leave. Another candidate was chosen, but Boas helped arrange various research and teaching jobs for Benedict over the next several years. Her work included fieldwork trips among the Zuñi, Cochiti, and Pima peoples.

In 1931, with the support of Boas, Benedict was hired as an assistant professor of anthropology at Columbia after nearly a decade of teaching without a sustained appointment. With the security of this new position she was able to separate from her husband and begin a truly independent life.

Benedict quickly became prominent in the field of anthropology. Her *Patterns in Culture* (1934) is considered a classic. Her thesis is that each culture values and privileges certain behaviors and personality types. Thus, one cannot evaluate one culture using the standards of another. She also pointed out that every culture exerts pressure on its members to conform to its society's pattern and tends to reward those who do.

She noted, however, that a behavior valued in one culture could be stigmatized in another. In both *Patterns of Culture* and her 1934 article "Anthropology and the Abnormal," she cited the example of homosexuality,

presented in Plato's *Republic* "as one of the major means to the good life."

She further noted that in American Indian tribes "homosexuals are often regarded as exceptionally able." She discussed the institution of berdaches (men who adopt the clothing and occupations of women). She contrasted the situation of the berdache, whose role could bring him esteem, with that of the invert (as gays and lesbians were then called) in homophobic cultures who could feel "guilt...[and a] sense of inadequacy" because of "the disrepute which social traditions visit upon him."

During the decade of the 1930s Franz Boas, disturbed by the rise of the Nazis in his native Germany, resolved "to undermine the pseudo-scientific theory on which anti-Semitic propaganda is based." Benedict shared his concerns and began working with various organizations to educate the public about the menace of racism. Previously not particularly engaged politically, Benedict was becoming an activist in the cause of racial equality.

In the same period Benedict's personal life was taking a new direction as well. She fell in love with medical student Natalie Raymond, who moved in with her. In her journal Benedict recorded that "loving Nat and taking such delight in her I have the happiest condition for living that I've ever known."

The two eventually parted ways around 1938, but soon thereafter Benedict met psychologist Ruth Valentine, who would become her partner for the rest of her life.

Benedict continued her campaign for cultural understanding. In 1943 she moved to Washington, D. C. to become the head (and initially the sole member) of the Basic Analysis Section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence of the Office of War Information, a position she sought to use "to get policy makers to take into account different habits and customs of other parts of the world." She used anthropological analysis to produce papers on a number of countries, including Germany, Holland, Rumania, and Thailand (then called Siam).

She also undertook an in-depth study of the culture of Japan, which was bewildering to many Americans. Her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946) proved extremely influential, not only in educating Americans about the Japanese people but also in providing policy makers with an understanding of the society that could facilitate relations in the post-war period.

At the war's conclusion the Office of Naval Research set up a program for human behavior studies. Benedict was chosen to head one of their initial projects. With a budget of \$100,000 she was able to establish the organization Research in Contemporary Cultures. Among those whom Benedict named to direct it with her were Ruth Valentine and Margaret Mead.

Benedict achieved the status of the most prominent American anthropologist of her generation. In 1946 she was elected the first woman president of the American Anthropological Association.

In the spring of 1948 Benedict accepted a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) invitation to lecture at a seminar in Czechoslovakia. Although her health was poor, she agreed to participate. In her remarks she reiterated her belief that accepting "different ideals and alternative social arrangements" was essential in the quest for peace and cooperation.

Two days after her return to New York, Benedict suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized. Friends, including Valentine and Mead, gathered around her in her final few days.

Benedict died on September 17, 1948.

After Benedict's death Mead took on the leadership of Research in Contemporary Cultures, concluding the work in 1951. She remained true to Benedict's vision of the project as an interdisciplinary and non-

hierarchical enterprise that would highlight the perspective of women on society. Another important goal for Benedict was to create a working culture in which cooperation was valued. The result was extraordinarily successful: over fifty publications were produced.

In tribute to her mentor, Mead, who was Benedict's literary executor, wrote a biography of Benedict that included selections of her work and edited an extensive collection of Benedict's writings, *An Anthropologist at Work* (1959). In the introduction to the latter book, Mead said that she wanted "to set down what will otherwise be lost about how Ruth Benedict became a figure of transition, binding the broken sureties of a past age, to which she was fully heir, to the uncertainties which precede a new integration in human thinking, for we shall not look upon her like again."

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