

Asia Anthropology: Science or Spying?

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NEW YORK, Nov. 21— One of America's foremost intellectual societies, the American Anthropological Association, ended its 70th annual meeting here today. But it did not end the volatile, distinctly unintellectual uproar within its membership over whether some members' research in South-

east Asia has been more political than scientific.

The association went through two explosive sessions on the issue, finally adopting a position on it late Saturday, a position decrying new dangers in anthropology.

For the last 20 months, the organization has feuded over the implication that some anthropologists working among hill tribes in northern Thailand, supposedly studying ways of life as anthropologists do, were in fact spies for the U.S. Department on Defense and the royal Thai government.

Underlying the thousands of words and multiple sub-issues raised by the various factions is the worry that anthropologists' detailing of the life style of a group of people—including such seemingly mundane details as forest trails, working times, gathering places and so forth—end up in diagrams for a low-level bombing run.

If nothing else, the debate underscores the U.S. government's extensive funding of social scientists' research in Southeast Asia through the Agency for International Development, through the Central Intelligence Agency

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and through various agencies of the Department of Defense

One faction of the Anthropological Association believes fellow members in Thailand provided information to help put down revolution. Another faction believes the anthropologists fought government attempts to subdue revolution there.

Activities of the anthropologists in Thailand surfaced in March, 1970, when a research assistant copied documents from the files of Dr. Michael Moerman of the University of California at Los Angeles. The information made its way first to the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (and into its publication) and to Dr. Eric Wolf, who is chairman of the Anthropological Association's ethics commission.

Dr. Wolf, the students and many other members of the association contend that the documents prove the anthropologists in Thailand were spies.

When Wolf wrote to the four anthropologists identified in the document to obtain explanations, and then told his board that he had done so, the dike opened.

The association's board of directors accused Wolf of exceeding his authority and of acting precipitously, imputing guilt to the four men in his letter without first having talked to them.

Wolf and another ethics committee member, Dr. Joseph G. Jorgensen, both then angrily quit the ethics committee, accusing the organization's leadership of ducking the ethical issue of whether an anthropologist should properly be studying man or, instead, influencing government's hold over men.

"The board," said the two in resigning, "averts its eyes from the real source of a danger which threatens not only the integrity of the association, but the fate and welfare of the people among whom we work."

The issue has since been raised among the membership in furious statements published in the association's monthly news letter.

The board finally appointed a committee to investigate all aspects of the situation, naming its most famous member, Dr. Margaret Mead, to head the inquiry.

The committee's lengthy report was presented at the association's meeting here, and its conclusions—which include absolving any members of ethical wrongdoing in Thailand—were emotionally rejected by the association's membership.

Dr. Mead herself was furious.

"I never intended for anybody to vote up or down on this thing," she told a reporter after a meeting. "You make it clear in your paper that this wasn't intended to be a resolution. It was for background information. I just wanted it presented at the meeting, not voted on. But the board wouldn't let me do it that way."

She indicated that she had been tricked by the board, and said they would not even let her make a statement about the report before it was presented unless she first cleared the wording with board members.

"The makeup of the board changed between the time they asked me to do it and now," she said glumly.

What became clear in the meeting was that the association's younger members see the 69-year-old Dr. Mead as a kind of anthropological Uncle Tom. And it became obvious very quickly that the younger members had the vote. The first vote was 38 to 74 to reject the report's initial portion on anthropological activities in Thailand over the years.

The Mead committee's report made conclusions on all sides of a number of issues, including a provision that Dr. Mead said she considered most important:

"A new ethical imperative has emerged, the obligation to protect data on communities which might expose them to wholesale destruction." This means disguising names, places and identities, she explained.

No one disagreed with that conclusion, but other sections of the report brought hisses and laughs. Its allusions to "McCarthyism of the left" by members who questioned the activities in Thailand were in themselves heckled as McCarthyism.

A contention in the report that studies "under the heading of counter-insurgency" are "much the same activities that were called 'community development' at

an earlier time" raised particular hostility.

The report said that "expecting funding for research regardless of how it was labeled was 'well within the traditional canons of acceptable behavior for the applied anthropologists.'"

Dr. Steve A. Barnett, a young Princeton social scientist, disagreed, saying that "this is not acceptable behavior for anyone except an imperialist."

Dr. Mead and fellow committee member Dr. David L. Olmsted emphasized that they have read all the evidence available on activities in Thailand and feel the Americans there were doing only good. "Their affection for the country as a whole seemed to shine through very strongly," said Olmsted.

"At the time," he said, they "hoped to change things for the better." They became disillusioned when their efforts in behalf of hill people were thwarted by the government, he said, and "one by one they dropped out."

Dr. Mead, who was president of the association a decade ago, chided members for talking against taking research money from the Department of Defense.

"Almost everyone in this," she said, "has benefited by funds labeled Defense, or at least their students have."

The mood of the 700 members, after an acrimonious four hours that ended early Saturday, was to get rid of the issue. They voted overwhelmingly to reject the report in full and refer the issue back to the board. Dr. Mead and her committee voted with the majority.

Later Saturday, however, the association unanimously approved a resolution incorporating the sense of the Mead committee's important paragraph. Dr. Mead herself seconded the resolution.

This resolution orders the board to set up a continuing body to study organizations that fund and utilize social scientists "in such areas as counter-insurgency, classification, regional development, population control and resettlement . . ." and spread this information to all anthropologists. Further, the resolution asks that all anthropologists be alerted to the dangers of activities " . . . which have the potential of bringing serious harm to relatively powerless people."

But what was left unsaid at the meeting may have been more important than what was said.

One veteran anthropologist, who declined to be identified, told a reporter:

"This whole thing is hypocritical. All these guys who were sounding off about how awful it is to take government money will walk out of here Monday and go write another grant application."

"You take these guys, making \$7,400 a year, and suddenly they have the prospect of a \$30,000 grant, a \$100 a day per diem, a car, eating at the best places in some country, and they can't resist."

Furthermore, he said, no one at the meeting dared to bring up the inherent paternalism of Americans' making their livings and their reputations off of alien and underdeveloped cultures.

He pointed to the fact that anthropology as such is not a particularly marketable commodity, unless the results are economically or politically valuable to some interests, nor is studying American cultures as romantic as studying those in New Guinea.

Another thing that did not come up was a point that Wolf and Jorgensen made in an article they wrote for the intellectuals' Playboy, The New York Review of Books.

"The researcher would get the chance to carry on field work with a heavy sense of engagement in a global warfare operation, punctuated by occasional participation in an international meeting, followed by a dry martini at the airport bar in Bangkok or Dar es Salaam. In exchange, others receive the right to play with his data..."

Moerman, the man whose files were copied 20 months ago, insisted in a letter to the association's newsletter that his role in each of the projects in which he was involved was solely to help the Thais of the north in their own self-determination.

Two other facets left unstated are also important, other anthropologists present told a reporter. The first is a growing feeling in American society, reflected among the intellectuals, that anything involving government is tainted. The second is that it is possible anthropologists and scientists have no place trying to influence government in any way.