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Encyclopédie internationale
des histoires de l'anthropologie

Finding Her Voice: the Life and Works of Ruth Murray Underhill

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2017

Pour citer cet article

Morgan, Mindy, 2017. "Finding Her Voice: the Life and Works of Ruth Murray Underhill", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.
URL stable - Handle : 10670/1.2wabcx | URL Bérose : article1071.html

Consulté le 24 octobre 2020 à 13h51min

Publication Bérose : ISSN 2648-2770
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Ruth Murray Underhill (1883-1984) was an American anthropologist trained in the Boasian tradition. Despite not starting her training in anthropology until her mid-forties, she had a lengthy career and published extensively, authoring over thirty scholarly and popular books, including works of fiction. She was an avid chronicler of American Indian tribes, particularly those in the Southwest; however, her longest collaboration was with the Tohono O’odham community. Her fieldwork within the community produced her most significant works, *Papago Woman* (1936), *Singing for Power* (1993[1938]), and *Papago Religion* (1946).

Underhill was born in Ossining, New York and brought up within a traditional upper middle-class family. While she rebelled against many of the strictures and prohibitions of her early life particularly in regard to established gender roles, she attributed many her later successes in conducting ethnographic work with traits such as patience and quiet listening that were reflective of her Quaker upbringing. She graduated from Vassar College in 1905 with a degree in language and literature. After a short time in Boston as a social worker for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, she embarked on a European tour that included studies in London and Munich. Upon her return to the United States, she began a career as a social worker working among Italian-American immigrant families in New York City. During World War I, she volunteered with the Red Cross and was sent to Italy to oversee the establishment of orphanages for children of soldiers. She married Cecil Crawford in 1919, and divorced amicably ten years later. In an often repeated story, Underhill went directly from the courthouse where her divorce was finalized to the steps of Columbia University where she enrolled in graduate courses in anthropology. Though the story is apocryphal, it suggests the ways in which Underhill worked against societal expectations for women of her age and status throughout her life.

Underhill’s engagement with anthropology was motivated by her previous social work experiences and questions as to why individuals and communities acted in the ways that they did. After having investigated fields such as sociology and economics, Underhill credits Ruth Benedict with convincing her that anthropology provided the most appropriate methods and means of investigating the underlying causes of human behavior. Underhill arrived at Columbia during a dynamic time. Margaret Mead had arrived back from her time in Samoa, and the questions and concerns of Americanist anthropology were expanding beyond the United States. Boasian anthropology, which had dominated the discipline during the first decades of the 20th century, began to evolve into a variety of different theoretical and methodological orientations (See Darnell 1998, Murray 2013). During her time in New York, she grew especially close to Gladys Reichard, who was teaching at Barnard at the time. Underhill admired her intellect as well as her ability to connect with local residents and consultants (Underhill 2014, 142-43). Eventually, the two would intersect in their research

among the Navajo and collaborate on the Hogan School, an early attempt at bilingual and bicultural education.

Ruth Benedict first encouraged Underhill to work within the Tohono O'odham community, and in the summer of 1931, she began fieldwork with the community with whom she would remain close to for the remainder of her life. The majority of her fieldwork centered on women's experiences. Underhill chose to focus on women's lives not only because of access, but also her belief that male ethnographers had both overlooked and misunderstood the roles of women within society. A fortuitous meeting with Marie Chona in Tucson, Arizona resulted in a collaboration between the two women that would eventually be published as *An Autobiography of a Papago Woman*. Both women had powerful visions of the way which their respective societies should be and harsh critiques of the ways that they were. In particular, Underhill used Chona's story to not only illuminate O'odham culture, but also to offer an alternative to established gender expectations in dominant US society. Eventually, Underhill gained access to male O'odham ceremonial leaders and began to collect the speeches and songs that were integral to the O'odham ritual cycle that governed social life. These texts became central to many of her published works including *Singing for Power* and *Papago Religion*.

Facing limited employment prospects after completing her degree, Underhill joined the federal government, serving in a number of different capacities in federal agencies. After helping with various projects such as teaching US Indian Service employees about Native American culture, Underhill was assigned to the Soil Conservation Survey and tasked with providing information about Southwestern tribes to the Department of Agriculture. She soon transferred to the Indian Education Division and eventually was promoted to supervisor. In this position, she wrote educational pamphlets and helped to train teachers assigned to reservation schools. As part of her appointment, she conducted research among a number of tribes in the western United States. This material and experiences became the basis for much of her future teaching and publications.

While her employment by a number of federal programs placed her at the center of emerging acculturationist studies and debates concerning applied anthropology, Underhill maintained an essentially Boasian approach in her research and writing (Morgan 2017). Her work with the federal government intersected with the efforts of the Applied Anthropology Unit (AAU), a short-lived program initiated by John Collier to provide studies of contemporary tribal life and to help implement the Indian Reorganization Act (See Kelly 1980; Kennard and MacGregor 1953). Much of this anthropological work focused on acculturation studies that largely abandoned Boas' historical and textual focus in favor of analyses of the ways and degrees of change communities experienced as a result of contact with others. Anthropologists in both the AAU as well as the Bureau of American Ethnology viewed these new studies as being better suited to helping direct social policy than the salvage studies of the past (See Morgan 2017).

Underhill frequently interacted with the AAU; however, she never embraced the acculturationist model in her own scholarly writings. Rather, she remained committed to the Boasian focus on the collection and analysis of texts. For Underhill, anthropological works should not be used as tools for social change, but rather should be seen as a space for social

encounter. Ethnography, in particular offered an explanatory model and thus were conduits by which people could both discover and understand communities different from their own. Books such as *Here Come the Navajo* (1953) and the *First Penthouse Dwellers of America* (1938) were intentionally written to make Indigenous culture accessible and understandable for a non-Native audience. Importantly, pamphlets produced from her work for the Indian education office became standards in classrooms, including schools within Native American communities (Lavendar 2006, 111).

In 1948, she left government service and took a faculty position at the University of Denver. She taught for only five years, officially retiring at the age of seventy to travel. After returning home, she continued to write and publish more general materials on American Indian communities including her textbooks, *Red Man's America* (1953) and *Red Man's Religion* (1965). She also maintained a commitment to public outreach, hosting a local television show from 1957-58. Underhill continued to publish throughout her life. In the mid-1970s, she worked with local O'odham speakers and the anthropologist Donald Bahr to retranslate some of the song texts from her initial fieldwork back into the O'odham language (Underhill, et. al. 1997). In 1979, she experienced "the crowning part" of her life when she was honored by the Tohono O'odham community for her engagement with them with a banquet and a parade (Herold 1980). Underhill died in 1984 just before her 101st birthday, leaving not only the legacy of her published work, but a model for engaged, collaborative relationships between anthropologists and local Indigenous communities.

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