



Nancy Tanner, 1933–1989

New York Times Obituary

“Nancy M. Tanner, 56, Anthropology Writer”

July 4, 1989

Nancy Makepeace Tanner, an anthropologist and author of "On Becoming Human," which deals with food-gatherers in early human evolution, died of a heart attack June 20 at the home of her brother-in-law in Tucson, Ariz. She was 56 years old.

Mrs. Tanner was an associate professor of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Cruz and a fellow of the university's Merrill College. She joined the faculty in 1969 from the University of Chicago, where she had earned her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Her doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley laid the groundwork for her fieldwork and studies with matrilineal Moslems in West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Mrs. Tanner's book, "On Becoming Human," published by Cambridge Press in 1981, reconstructed early social behavior from field studies of primates and of human food-gathering societies, as well as from fossil and archeological data. In the book Mrs. Tanner developed , a theory of human origins that focused on the role of female food-gatherers in evolution.

Mrs. Tanner, who lived in Santa Cruz, is survived by her husband, Jim Moore; two daughters, Elna Brunckhorst of Berkeley and Elizabeth Brunckhorst of Felton, Calif.; a stepmother, Edith Tanner of Green Bay, Wis.; a brother, Tom Tanner of Yorkville, Ill., and a grandson.

Biography from the Nancy Makepeace Tanner Papers Collection (OAC)

https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf900009n0/entire_text/

Nancy Makepeace Tanner 1933-1989, Anthropology: Santa Cruz, Associate Professor

Nancy Makepeace Tanner was born on June 18, 1933, in Aurora, Illinois. Her mother died when she was three years old and she and her younger brother were raised by her father. She first attended school in a one-room schoolhouse up the road from her father's farm. At age 16, she was admitted to the University of Chicago's early admissions's program and at 19 received her BA degree. After graduation, she became a premedical student, but soon after she dropped out when she got married. After two daughters, she got a divorce, and returned to the University of Chicago to obtain an M.A. in education in 1959. Moving to California, she began graduate studies in anthropology at UC Berkeley and, with her daughters, spent three years doing fieldwork in West Sumatra. Soon after her return from the field she came to the University of Chicago as a Carnegie Fellow of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations. She taught there for two years before joining UCSC in 1969. Professor Tanner received her Ph.D. from UC Berkeley in 1971.

Trained in both cultural and physical anthropology, Professor Tanner had a wide ranging and creative intellect. She was concerned about overfragmentation in the discipline and in her work integrated the various subfields of anthropology. Her research, writing and teaching focused on three areas: dispute and conflict resolution,

human communication, and sex and gender, which she examined from evolutionary, social and socio-cultural perspectives. Professor Tanner was a leading authority on the Minangkabau of Western Sumatra. She wrote numerous articles on their legal system, sociolinguistics and social organization. Her 1974 article, "Matrifocality in Indonesia, Africa and among Black Americans" proposed a rethinking of then current theories about matriliney and presented a new model about women's roles in social systems.

In 1981, she published a path-breaking book, *On Becoming Human* (Cambridge University Press) in which she traced the transition from ape to australopithecine in human evolution, based on her analysis of fossil and archaeological data. The book, which has been reprinted twice, presented a powerful new theory about women's roles in human evolution and was widely praised by colleagues such as F. Clark Howell, Gayza Teleki and Glenn Isaac. In 1985, the book was translated into Italian.

Recognition of Professor Tanner's contributions came in the form of invitations to speak at numerous conferences in physical anthropology, archaeological and socio-cultural anthropology at universities in this country and abroad. Always an avid reader of science-fiction, she was delighted when asked to contribute a paper to a conference on interstellar migrations at Los Alamos. Professor Tanner held rigorous standards for her students and was known for her Socratic approach to teaching. Re-entry students, in particular, saw her as a role model and found in her a sympathetic and supportive advocate. A former student said at her memorial service, "I benefited enormously from both her scholarship and her compassionate concern for others." Although Professor Tanner had a long history of epilepsy and heart problems, she gave generously of her time to her students and colleagues.

Professor Tanner died from a heart attack on June 20, 1989, during a visit in Arizona where she had gone with her husband, Jim Moore, to attend a family wedding. She is survived by her husband, her two daughters, a grandson, a brother, a stepmother and an aunt. Her colleagues and former students join with UCSC Chancellor, Robert Stevens, in noting, "Our campus is the poorer with the loss of Nancy Tanner's professionalism and her personal warmth and concern."

University of California: In Memoriam, 1989 - Diane Lewis, Triloki Pandey, Carolyn Clark