

Chapter 7

SUICIDE IN PALAU

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Palau, a group of islands in the Caroline archipelago, is the westernmost part of the Micronesian Islands. Formerly, Palau was a district of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), which was created by the United Nations and entrusted to the United States in an agreement signed in San Francisco in 1947. After adopting its Constitution in 1979, Palau District became the Republic of Palau. The TTPI official census estimated Palau's population at 15,870 in 1982. (The Palau Office of Planning and Statistics enumerated a population of 12,129 in 1982.) Ethnically, Palauans act and behave much like their neighboring Malaysians, Melanesians, and Polynesians. Having visited some of the places and some of the people from the areas, the author finds a lot of similarities to Palau. For example, we send our young men to the abai (men's house) for initiation. It is from the men's house experience that young men learn our practices of fishing, fighting and sex.

Although reports of a few rare suicides appear in 19th century accounts of Palau (Kubary 1888), today Palauans generally believe that there was no suicide traditionally in Palau. The Palauan language has no single term meaning "suicide." Currently, suicide is almost synonymous with hanging, and is thought to be a learned behavior. The "first suicide" in Palau is widely believed to be a man named Walter Gibbons, who was a half-Palauan, half-English educated male. He was about 25 years old when he hanged himself in the hills just above Melekeok village on Babeldaob. He hanged himself with a rope made from a piece of cloth, a portion of which he tied around his head to cover his eyes.

Because Gibbons hanged himself away from the village, it took some time for the people to find him. The reason given for his suicide was that his parents prohibited him from marrying a woman whom he loved. He married the woman, anyway, but she committed adultery and he lost face. The woman was Ngedikes, from Wuds, a high-ranking clan in northern Palau. This hanging became big news in Palau at the time. Most older people who were in Palau at that time remember the details.

Sometime afterwards there was a second case of hanging by a Palauan male named Odasi, about 14 years old, also from Melekeok village. He was scolded and whipped by his uncle. My informant, an 88 year-old woman, lived in the same village. She said, "After these two, hangings were not that exciting news anymore, and besides, most of the acts were committed by the Japanese nationals."

Because of the work on suicide in Micronesia by Hezel, Rubinstein and others, we in Palau joined in the effort and began to look into suicide in Palau. We were able to record 63 Palauan suicides, of which we were able to study 39, or 60 percent of them. Our informants were parents, siblings, cousins, spouses, and other relatives. We tried to cross-check our results with anyone who was present in the locality and was old enough to remember what occurred at the time.

Table 1 shows the reported cases of suicide in Palau during the various foreign administrations and the estimated annual rate per 100,000. Table 2 shows the number of cases from 1914 to 1984 that were available for study. The increase in suicide rate is evident. Table 3 shows numbers of reported suicides and suicide rates from 1980 to 1984. Table 4 shows tabulated results of 39 suicide cases available for study. (These 39 cases studied were a non-random sample of the urban-dwelling cases.)

The findings show that all but one suicide were by males. Most of the suicides occurred in the District Center (Koror), where half of the population resides. Most of the victims were Roman Catholic, a group that comprises 50% of the population (personal communication, Rev. Smith, Jesuit Superior of the Palau Catholic Mission). The majority (75%) were single, divorced or separated. Frequently they were the eldest son in the family, and came from crowded homes or families with a household density greater than six, the average size of Palauan families. Many of them had dropped out of school. Many of them had lived at home with parents or spouse, and had not traveled outside of Palau. The parents of the suicide victims were mostly Japanese-educated who grew up during the Japanese period, and whose children grew up during the American period. Family income did not seem to be a factor. Suicidal ideation and previous suicidal gestures were present among some of the victims and many of them had left some sort of note or memento. Most hanged themselves inside or nearby their home, suggesting an intent that others should find them. The typical method of suicide was hanging by rope.

Our study did not examine the contents of the notes or the mementos, or consider the frame of mind of the victims, if anyone knew. We asked only one question regarding motive for committing suicide. Many of the informants were unsure of their information and could not answer some questions. Our findings, although somewhat incomplete, will be a useful guide for further research. The author feels that we can understand more about suicide in Palau if we focus on how Palauans react to different forms of stress i.e., political, economic, social and inter-personal.

Future studies should also focus on the frame of mind of the suicidal person and attempt to reconstruct the frame of mind of the successful suicide, from the notes, mementos and last communications. The author suggests this because the present study revealed that some Palauan words are commonly used in describing feelings attributed to suicidal persons. These words, I think, describe culturally recognized defense mechanisms Palauans use when stressed. These terms are listed below (definitions from McManus 1977).

- Bid from Omid: twist (hair or cord); manipulate (person); twiddle something out of a person; bother (oneself) about something. Synonymous with Mengemekl.
- Cher from Chemer: being hurt and giving up; demanding attention, the best, or being first, but when ignored or refused one would withdraw from group, etc. Not joining because one was not invited or included in the invitation. Palauans think that a person who often operates this way is an insecure one.
- Blisekl from Omisekl: to do something but grudgingly. To continue doing an act or something beyond necessity. Cher and Omid usually precede the feeling or frame of mind of Blisekl.
- Kurt: (n. obl. poss.) action of hurting someone's feeling; disdain; despair. This is from the word Mengurt.
- Osiich Reng: (from Olsiich Reng meaning darken, boil until it is in molasses form; to tighten a screw. Confirmed planned action. Having satisfaction because someone understands or feels exactly as expected.
- Mengemekl: When Blisekl is prolonged and intense, it is termed as Mengemekl. Mengemekl is to wedge in or to pry something between a tight spot.

This study of suicide in Palau suggests that some Palauans are

experiencing considerable stress, despite their relative affluence and the seemingly peaceful times and environment. The bonds that bind individuals, groups, and villages are being stressed beyond their tensility. Individuals, families, clans and villages are losing their reference points or roots, and thus are acting erratically. Talking with some of the people with suicidal ideation or who have made suicidal gestures, one can feel in these persons a sense of bondlessness or rootlessness and uselessness. They become very lonely. They find no meaning in their existence. They find no solace in the availability of materials, money and affluence around them. A slight problem may trigger their defense mechanisms and create a frame of mind or situation that can lead to suicide.

Could this be the same reason we are, as a group, committing some form of social and political suicide? When does a Palauan feel secure, stable, comfortable, and happy? How does he try to maintain such equilibrium? These are some of the important questions we will have to address. The Office of Mental Health Service in Palau will continue to study these questions, and we would welcome others who wish to come join us in this endeavor.

REFERENCES

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Table 1

Reported Suicides and Suicide Rates
During German, Japanese and American Times

P E R I O D	No. of Cases	Annual rate per 100,000 population	Average Estimated Population
German Time 1885-1914 (29 years)	0	0	-
Japanese Time 1914-1944 (30 years)	2	1.1	6,000
American Time 1944-1984 (40 years)	61	13	11,600
TOTAL (1885-1984) (99 years)	63		
Source: Administrative Service, Republic of Palau, 1984			

Table 2

Cases Made Available for Study
1914-1984

PERIOD	Cases Available for Study
German Times 1885-1914 (29 years)	0
Japanese Times 1914-1944 (30 years)	2
American Times 1944-1980 (36 years)	23
Republic of Palau 1981-1984* (4 years)	14
TOTAL	39
Source: Alcohol & Drug Abuse Service, Palau	

*1984 figure is only for first 9 months

Table 3

Reported Cases of Suicide and Suicide Rates
for Period 1980 - 1984

Year	No. of Cases	Rate per 100,000 pop.	Republic of Palau Population ¹
1980 ²	4	33	12,116
1981	2	16	12,122
1982	4	33	12,129
1983	4	33	12,139
1984 ³	3	25	12,144

Sources: ¹Office of Planning and Statistics, Republic of Palau
²1980 Census
³First 9 months only

**Average Annual Rate per 100,000 = 28.

Table 4

Suicide Survey in the Republic of Palau (N = 39)

1.	Cases of Suicide That Were Available for Study	%
	a. German Time 1800 - 1912 (0)	0.0
	b. Japanese Time 1912 - 1945 (1)	2.5
	c. American Time 1945 - 1980 (24)	61.0
	d. Republic of Palau 1981 - 1984 (14)	36.0
2.	Sex:	%
	a. Female (1)	2.5
	b. Male (38)	97.0
3.	Residence:	%
	a. Center, Koror (25)	64.0
	b. Outside Koror (14)	36.0
4.	Domicile:	%
	a. With parents (7)	18.0
	b. Grandparents (1)	2.5
	c. Aunt's (3)	8.0
	d. Jail (3)	8.0
	e. Girl friends (2)	5.0
	f. Father (1)	2.5
	g. Relatives (2)	5.0
	h. Home with spouse (10)	26.0
	i. Brothers (2)	2.5
	j. Mothers (1)	2.5
	k. Sisters (3)	8.0
	l. School dorm (1)	2.5
	m. Nephews (1)	2.5
	n. Outside Koror, Honolulu & Saipan (2)	5.0
5.	Number of Siblings:	%
	a. Only child (2)	5.0
	b. Two (1)	2.5
	c. Three (5)	13.0
	d. Four (2)	5.0
	e. Five (3)	8.0
	f. Six (2)	5.0
	g. Seven (3)	8.0
	h. Eight (6)	15.0
	i. Nine (5)	13.0
	j. Ten or more (7)	18.0
	k. Ten (3)	8.0

6.	Number of People in the Home	%
	a. Alone (1)	2.5
	b. Less than five (10)	26.0
	c. More than five (23)	59.0
	d. Not known (5)	13.0
7.	Birth Rank	%
	a. Only child (2)	5.0
	b. No. 1 (8)	20.0
	c. No. 2 (7)	18.0
	d. No. 3 (4)	10.0
	e. No. 4 (2)	5.0
	f. No. 5 (3)	8.0
	g. No. 6 or more (1)	2.5
	h. Youngest (5)	13.0
	i. Missing (7)	18.0
8.	Adopted:	%
	a. Yes (11)	28.0
	b. No (28)	72.0
9.	Parental Level of Education:	%
	a. None (3)	8.0
	b. Elementary (4)	10.0
	c. Japanese Elementary School (28)	72.0
	d. German (4)	10.0
10.	Religion:	%
	a. Modekngei (4)	10.0
	b. Seventh-day Adventist (2)	5.0
	c. Protestant (8)	21.0
	d. Roman Catholic (20)	51.0
	e. Others (5)	13.0
11.	Education:	%
	a. Attended Elementary (8)	20.0
	b. Attended High School (16)	41.0
	c. Attended College (5)	13.0
	d. Graduated Japanese Schooling (7)	18.0
	e. Did not attend school (3)	8.0
12.	School Leaver Status:	%
	a. Drop-out (18)	46.0
	b. Completed school (18)	46.0
	c. Never attended school (3)	8.0

13.	Marital Status:	%
	a. Married (6)	15.0
	b. Divorced (4)	10.0
	c. Separated (2)	5.0
	d. Single (23)	59.0
	e. Living together (4)	10.0
14.	Marital Problems:	%
	a. Adjustment (14)	36.0
	b. Financial (3)	8.0
	c. Social (0)	0.0
	d. Love (0)	0.0
	e. No problems (22)	56.0
15.	Occupation:	%
	a. Government (7)	18.0
	b. Sawmill (1)	2.5
	c. Carvers (2)	5.0
	d. Businessmen (1)	2.5
	e. Sales boy (1)	2.5
	f. Band players (1)	2.5
	g. Sailors (3)	8.0
	h. Unemployed (15)	38.0
	i. Carpenters (4)	10.0
	j. Fishermen (3)	8.0
	k. Copra maker (1)	2.5
16.	Travel:	%
	a. Palau only (22)	56.0
	b. Guam (5)	13.0
	c. Saipan (2)	5.0
	d. FSM (7)	18.0
	e. Hawaii (1)	2.5
	f. Mainland USA (1)	2.5
	g. Others (0)	0.0
17.	Criminal Record:	%
	a. Offense (5)	13.0
	b. Custody (6)	15.0
	c. Charged (3)	8.0
	d. Sentenced (2)	5.0
	e. Discharged/paroled (0)	0.0
	f. No criminal record (23)	59.0

18.	Medical Condition:	%
	a. Any known medical condition (21)	54.0
	1. Mentally ill (8)	21.0
	2. Epigastric problem (2)	5.0
	3. Asthma with arthritis (1)	2.5
	4. Pulmonary tuberculosis (1)	2.5
	5. Weakness of leg (1)	2.5
	6. High B/P and obese (1)	2.5
	7. Epilepsy (1)	2.5
	8. Neck & back aches (2)	5.0
	9. Asthma (2)	5.0
	10. Leprosy (1)	2.5
	11. Amputee (1)	2.5
	b. None (16)	41.0
	c. Not known (2)	5.0
19.	History of Suicide in Family:	%
	a. Yes (10)	26.0
	b. No (29)	74.0
20.	Previous Suicide by Friend:	%
	a. Yes (3)	8.0
	b. No (36)	92.0
21.	Changes in Behavior before Suicide:	%
	a. Eating (2)	5.0
	b. Sleeping (6)	15.0
	c. A & B (7)	18.0
	d. Others (6 mos.) (7)	18.0
	e. Not known (16)	41.0
22.	Frequency of Suicidal Ideation:	%
	a. Once (3)	8.0
	b. Twice (2)	5.0
	c. More than 2 times (7)	18.0
	d. Never (27)	69.0
23.	Frequency of Gestures:	%
	a. Once (4)	10.0
	b. Twice (2)	5.0
	c. More than 3 times (4)	10.0
	d. Never tried (29)	75.0

24.	Reasons:	%
	a. None given (22)	56.0
	b. Anger (2)	2.5
	c. Depressed (1)	2.5
	d. Mentally ill (5)	13.0
	e. Frustration (1)	2.5
	f. Financial (2)	5.0
	g. Family problem (2)	5.0
	h. Under the influence of ETO/Drug (4)	10.0
25.	Event Leading to the Act:	%
	a. Due to illness (2)	5.0
	b. Mentally ill (4)	10.0
	c. Love Affair (0)	0.0
	d. Anger (6)	15.0
	e. Not known (10)	26.0
26.	Drinking at the Time of Act:	%
	a. Yes (14)	36.0
	b. No (20)	51.0
	c. Not known (5)	13.0
27.	Method Used:	%
	a. Hanging (33)	85.0
	b. Drowning (1)	2.5
	c. Stabbing (2)	5.0
	d. Dynamiting self (1)	2.5
	e. Shooting self (2)	5.0
	f. Not found (0)	0.0
28.	How Far Away from People in General and Family in Particular:	%
	a. In the house (17)	44.0
	b. Near the house (14)	36.0
	c. Far Away (8)	20.0
29.	Act Discovered by Whom:	%
	a. In-laws (6)	15.0
	b. Children (1)	2.5
	c. Friends (4)	10.0
	d. Parents (1)	2.5
	e. Search Team (7)	18.0
	f. Not found (1)	2.5
	g. Others (19)	49.0

30.	Mementos:	%
	a. Notes (2)	5.0
	b. Letter (5)	13.0
	c. Messages (7)	18.0
	d. Not known (20)	51.0
31.	Reaction from Family to the Act:	%
	a. Shocked (20)	51.0
	b. Sad (4)	10.0
	c. Unexpected (11)	28.0
	d. Carefree (0)	0.0
	e. Scared (1)	2.5
	f. Expected (3)	8.0
32.	Reaction by Friends:	%
	a. Unexpected (19)	49.0
	b. Sad (5)	13.0
	c. Scared (0)	0.0
	d. Shocked (10)	26.0
	e. No feelings (5)	13.0
33.	Informant:	%
	a. Mother (8)	20.0
	b. Father (3)	8.0
	c. Sister (14)	36.0
	d. Brother (5)	13.0
	e. Daughter (3)	8.0
	f. Aunt (2)	5.0
	g. Nephew (1)	2.5
	h. Cousins (2)	5.0
	i. Wife (2)	5.0
	j. None (0)	0.0