

Chapter 11

SUICIDE AND WOMEN IN EAST KWAIO, MALAITA

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The people of East Kwaio consider women more likely to commit suicide than men, an attitude reflected in Kwaio mythology as well as popular belief. However, a collection of cases from the last 40 years indicates suicides by men and women are about equal in number. The Kwaio associate suicide with women because there are many unsuccessful suicide attempts by women, and few by men. Women are also seen to threaten suicide more often than men. When a woman shows certain signs of being a potential suicide, rigorous prevention procedures are put into effect by the community. In this chapter, I briefly review the sociocultural significance of suicide among the Kwaio, based on case materials gathered during my work there between 1979 and 1983.¹ I focus particularly on the significance of suicide and threatened suicide as an effective means of conflict resolution for women.

The Kwaio

Kwaio is one of ten ethnolinguistic groups on the island of Malaita in the Southeastern Solomon Islands. This chapter deals primarily with the approximately 800 Kwaio living in the mountains behind Sinalagu Harbor on the East Coast. An equal number of the Sinalagu Kwaio are Christians living in large villages on the coast. The Kwaio in the mountains live in small scattered hamlets and continue to practice their traditional religion. They, with other traditionalist Kwaio, make up the largest non-Christian group in the Solomons. This chapter concerns suicide in the context of the non-missionized culture.

The Kwaio practice slash and burn horticulture. Their main staples are dry taro and sweet potato. They raise pigs for ritual and feasting purposes, and for sale. Although there is some fishing in inland rivers and in Sinalagu Harbor it has never been as important as in most areas of Malaita. Until this century there was no coastal population in Sinalagu Harbor.

The Kwaio area is divided into named segments of land, which are centered around major shrines first founded by ancestors many generations ago (Keesing

1969:122). In these shrines, and many others of lesser importance, priests sacrifice pigs to, and communicate with, ancestral spirits on behalf of their descendants.

The Kwaio world is believed to be controlled by these ancestors, who enforce a strict tabu system. Ancestors are particularly concerned with the bodily functions of women, who must be isolated from the rest of the community during menstruation and childbirth. Pigs must be sacrificed to these spirits to expiate tabu violations, and to gain support for successful living. If violations are not corrected, the ancestors will punish the offending group of their descendants with sickness, deaths, or other misfortunes. The Kwaio have a strong emotional attachment to these deceased ancestors, and there is very little in their lives that is not believed subject to ancestral control. The most powerful ancestors are those that died long ago. Some of them are common to a great many people, and are given pigs in hundreds of different shrines.

Until the colonial era, the East Kwaio area as a whole was never united politically. Big men earned power through the feasting economy, as warriors, or as priests. Some men were noted for their oratory, and were important in politics within and between kin groups. One man might become powerful by combining all of these roles. Today all but the warrior status are still important. In addition there is now the role of leader in Kwaio, provincial, or national level politics. There is an area council, with those groups interested in district level politics choosing their own representatives.

The introduction of steel tools more than 100 years ago greatly reduced the work load of men. Men formerly cleared the trees from gardens and built fences around them to keep out pigs, all with flint tools. Women, however, have not benefitted as much from western technology. Their work of weeding and planting is still done by hand and with wooden digging sticks. In addition a taro blight in the 1950s made the Kwaio more dependent upon the introduced sweet potato. Sweet potato gardening has always been considered women's work, so their work load was increased even more.

Kwaio women are more traditional in orientation than men. They are not allowed to leave the area, while Kwaio men have been leaving to work on plantations since the 1870s. They may stay away for months or even years. Up to half of the young men of the area may be away at any one time (Roger Keesing, personal communication).

The history of Kwaio contact with Europeans has been long and sometimes

violent. In the early years of the Queensland and Fiji labor trade, several recruiting ships were attacked in the Kwaio area. Two missionaries were killed, one in 1966. The area was pacified in 1927 when a devastating government punitive expedition followed the killing of a district officer and 14 others at Sinalagu.

Following World War II Kwaio was a major center of Maasina Rule, a revitalization movement which strove for political autonomy for Solomon Islanders. Although it was eventually suppressed by the British colonial administration, many of the sentiments of the movement are still strong in East Kwaio today.

Suicide in Kwaio

The Kwaio recognize suicide as a serious problem. They say that the suicide rate is much higher today than in the past. Whether there actually has been an increase in suicide is difficult to say. There are no government records for the area, and the Kwaio have a tendency to idealize some aspects of their past history. The question has also gained political importance of late. In 1983 a contingent of Kwaio leaders went to Honiara to demand government compensation for the 1927 punitive expedition. They claimed that their ancestors were still punishing them for the expedition's desecration of shrines by, among other things, causing more people to commit suicide. The Kwaio also blame this rise in suicide on an increase in the importation of sorcery into Kwaio, and on ancestral anger over the violation of tabus by Christians. Whether or not the suicide rate has risen, it is quite high today. From 1979-1983 there were four suicides, three men and one woman, in the Sinalagu population of about 1500. This is an annual rate of approximately 53/100,000.

By far the most common method of suicide in Kwaio is by hanging, either from a tree in the jungle or from house rafters. The Kwaio term for suicide, ri'onga has the literal meaning 'strangle' but has become a generic term for suicide regardless of method. In addition to hanging, other methods include jumping off cliffs or walking into the sea. More recently a woman attempted suicide by taking an overdose of aspirin. A government doctor reported that suicide by chloroquine overdose is becoming a problem in other areas of Malaita.²

Another method of suicide was practiced by women in the past. When a woman was shamed (noniria'a), usually by being raped, she would climb to her

group's sacred men's house to demand that her male kin kill her. In all but one such case recorded, the woman was killed by strangling her with a cord. Men's houses were tabu and the usual penalty for a woman entering such sacred areas for any reason was death. When demanding that she be killed the woman would make clear the reason she wished to die, telling the name of the man who had raped her. The rapist himself was seen as the girl's actual murderer, and in every case he was hunted down and killed (see case #3 below).

As can be seen from Table 1, the Kwaio give a wide variety of explanations for individual suicides. It should be stressed that these explanations are Kwaio explanations. In some cases there were tensions in inter-family relationships that were not cited in explaining the suicide.

All of the pre-World War II suicides shown in Table 1 were by women, as were the few suicides which occurred in mythical accounts. The suicides in myth were the result of sorcery performed by men who had been insulted by the women. Although Kwaio discuss suicide as a problem associated primarily with women, the cases we collected for the period following World War II (post-1943) show the number of suicides by men and women to be about equal.³ It would, however, be misleading to interpret these statistics as contradicting. Suicide is associated with women because women attempt suicide and threaten to commit suicide much more than men. Similar to the data discussed by Poole in his chapter on the Bimin-Kuskusmin, only one unsuccessful attempt by a man was recorded, and he succeeded the next day.

Women can be burdened with a great deal of emotional stress in Kwaio society. Their real or supposed tabu violations are blamed for most of the serious misfortunes which befall their groups. In 1967 one woman committed suicide after being blamed for the terminal illness of her brother, to whom she was very close (Keesing 1983:120).

The most common reason for suicide among Kwaio women is a bad marriage. This was a reason cited for five of the ten post-war cases for which we were given an explanation. If the husband is thought to be the cause of the suicide he will be forced to pay compensation to his wife's kin. Before pacification he might have been killed by her kin. The following cases both occurred in the 1970s:

Case #1: A man treated his wife badly, beat her (uncommon in Kwaio), and spread rumors about her. They argued all the time. In 1979, after they had been married about a year, she spoke to him in front of several people: "You won't be able to hit me next time you see me." Later that afternoon she hung herself. The next day her mother attacked the husband's sister with a knife and severely wounded her. Both the husband's and mother's groups paid each other equal compensation.

Case #2: A woman who had recently been married became upset because her husband refused to consummate the marriage, and wasn't kind to her. She told her mother about it, and later the same day hung herself. The man had to pay a small death compensation and also lost the large brideprice his kin had just paid for the woman.

As can be seen from these two cases, suicide may also be a means of getting revenge against someone. In these and some other cases the women made clear to others the person causing their suicide. This could be even more effective in the days before pacification as the following case illustrates:

Case #3: A woman, Kofe'au, was raped by a man named Lamolamo. She followed him home in an effort to get him to marry her, but he made a curse against her entering his village. She spent that night at the edge of the village with his sympathetic relatives. The next morning she left, telling his relatives that, "I can't do anything about what he has done to me, so I'll just go home now. But listen for the slit gongs from my village."

She returned to her village and climbed to her family's men's house. "Come and strangle me [brother] Tagailamo!" And her brothers strangled her with a bowstring. Afterwards they played the song on the slit gongs that announces a death.

Lamolamo's kin heard the drums and said to him: "That is what you asked for and of course it has happened. They've killed Kofe'au."

"So the people up there, they killed Kofe'au and then they put up a bounty for Lamolamo's death. And no matter where Lamolamo ran, he was going to die for Kofe'au's death. Lamolamo asked for it, so what could he do? People hunted him ... and they killed Lamolamo for the death of Kofe'au."

This demonstrates how suicides in Kwaio could be, like those described by Counts (1980:332) in Kaliai, "an expression of power by otherwise powerless people." Kofe'au had been raped in revenge for another rape by one of her brothers, for which only a tiny compensation had been paid. She knew that her relatives would, therefore, only be able to demand a similarly unsatisfactory compensation for her own rape. The only way she could strike back at Lamolamo was by forfeiting her life. Some of the female suicides today can still be seen as expressions of power, although women are no longer likely to cause another's death through their own.

Kwaio women have more power than the Kaliai women described by Counts.

They may choose to raise their own pigs, and take part in the prestige economy independently of their husbands.⁴ A woman can usually count on her kin supporting her if it is felt she has been beaten wrongly, or if her husband has had an extramarital affair. A woman so wronged may leave her husband, and demand that he pay her compensation before she returns to him.

However, if a woman is having other less drastic problems in her relationship with her family, husband, or in-laws, she may feel powerless to correct the problem. Women are very conscious of their importance to their group. They take great pride in being good workers and in carefully following tabus. A woman thought to be lazy, or careless concerning tabus, will be strongly criticized by others, including other women. There may be times when a woman becomes distressed about her status vis-a-vis her relatives, especially if they are treating her in ways she feels are inappropriate.

As will be shown, the threat of suicide can force a woman's relatives to acknowledge her value to them by going to a great deal of trouble and expense to avert her death. To understand how this can occur, one must understand a kind of spirit possession called lafulafu.

Lafulafu and the Threat of Suicide

The most common kind of spirit possession in Kwaio is called lafulafu. Lafulafu may be caused either by angry ancestors of the victim, or another kind of spirit called kwasi. Kwasi are wild ancestral spirits. Many were purchased from other areas of Malaita, for a particular power they possessed, and then their "owners" died before teaching anyone how to control the spirit with sacrifice. If a group's true ancestors are angry they may allow these wild ancestors to enter the hamlet. Lafulafu is sometimes caused by sorcery as well.

There are a wide variety of symptoms of lafulafu possession. These may include irrationality, supernormal strength, sleeplessness, and trance-like behavior. Victims can sometimes be quite violent and often have to be physically restrained. Men occasionally become lafulafu, but much less often than women.⁵

It is assumed that a person who is lafulafu will try to commit suicide if given a chance, and this is why this possession is so feared by the Kwaio. While we have only one case of a woman verbally threatening suicide, the threat is implicit in lafulafu. It is a very real threat. Two of the female suicide

cases, and several serious attempts, were lafulafu at the time.

For this reason, and because she might trespass into tabu areas, a lafulafu woman must be kept under constant observation. Usually a large group of the woman's kin and in-laws will gather at her village to help keep watch over her. If she needs to be restrained people will take turns holding her. In extreme cases the woman may try to trick those watching her into letting her go, by saying she has recovered. But the symptoms are still obvious, and her guards 'know' she only wants to escape to hang herself. Violent cases may injure their guards, and potential weapons must be kept out of their reach.⁶

While the woman is being watched, men try to divine which ancestor is causing the possession, and what is required to effect a recovery. Usually one or more pigs will be sacrificed to expiate a tabu violation which caused the ancestor's anger. If a diviner must be consulted from another group he will be paid. If it is determined that a wild ancestor is possessing the woman, an exorcist may have to be employed as well. A woman may be lafulafu and virtually monopolize her family's activities for several days. Thus a case of lafulafu may cost the victim's group a great deal in terms of time, pigs and shell money.

Lafulafu is often contagious. Sometimes all of the younger women in a hamlet will be lafulafu at the same time. From this probably comes the belief that suicide itself is very contagious. After any hanging, strict ritual procedures must be followed to decontaminate the corpse and the hamlet. If this is not done it is thought that other suicides will soon follow. Only one double suicide was recorded outside of mythical accounts, although there have been several cases of suicide being followed immediately by others' suicide attempts.

It is difficult to determine the seriousness of many failed suicide attempts by lafulafu women. Since they are so closely watched, even if they escape, they are unlikely to succeed in hanging themselves before they are found. Genuine attempts may appear to have been calculated to allow interruption. Women have been found hanging unconscious, and revived.

Lafulafu often afflicts women during a time of inter-family problems. In many cases the women may feel that they have been treated unfairly by their family, husband, or in-laws.

Case #4: G had been lafulafu off and on since her father's death in the early 1970s. Soon after his death she was married to R. By the late 70s their relationship was deteriorating. She felt he was treating her badly, and even accused him of stealing one of her pigs. In 1980 she was lafulafu at least five times, and tried to commit suicide twice. Each time she was temporarily cured through pigs being sacrificed, by her family and in-laws, to the ancestor possessing her. Even when not lafulafu she spent many evenings alone in her house crying. In 1981 she was diagnosed by a doctor as being depressive and given tryptanol to take the next time she felt lafulafu coming on. In 1981 her feelings towards her husband began to turn into anger. Although she eventually had to take the medicine once, she had no further attacks of lafulafu, despite a dangerous miscarriage. In 1984 she left her husband and returned to her home. She now says she is cured of the lafulafu and healthy again. Some Kwaio said her illness was caused by one of her ancestors, but that the ancestor was angry because her husband had stolen one of her brother's pigs.

The Kwaio themselves recognize that lafulafu symptoms may be related to inter-family tensions. In case #4 the ancestral anger was connected to actions of the woman's husband. The validity of a supernatural explanation may even be questioned altogether for some cases:

Case #5: An unmarried woman in her late 20s tried to hang herself. The explanation given was that someone had made a ritual mistake, and one of her ancestors had possessed her to express its displeasure. She had been sick for several days before the attempt. This was the second time she had tried to commit suicide in a short period of time. Another woman, who was close to her, privately expressed doubt at the explanation given. She said that the woman tried to hang herself every time her brother became angry at her, even when his anger was justified.

It is also recognized that some women may fake lafulafu symptoms in order to manipulate situations:

Case #6: A young unmarried woman showed lafulafu symptoms for two days. Her mother and other close relatives treated the possession very seriously, and said she was suicidal. They blamed it on ancestral anger over tabu violations. However, two men who happened to be at the scene found it quite humorous. When I asked why, they explained that the woman obviously wasn't really lafulafu, and was probably faking in order to get the attention of some young boy she was interested in. They cited numerous cases of women pretending to be lafulafu, over men they eventually married.

But the vast majority of cases are taken very seriously. Even questionable cases are, at least formally, declared supernaturally caused. It is this supernatural element which gives a lafulafu victim's kin the cue to become openly concerned with her distress to the extent that they do.

Before the suicides in cases #1 and #2 above, the women let it be known to others that they were having serious problems. But there was no public

outpouring of support or understanding from their kin. People will be reluctant to interfere in others' marital relationships. If a woman is having problems with a brother or father, she may be unlikely to get a fair hearing or sympathy in the face of her more powerful male kinsman.

However, when the crisis becomes a supernatural one, it allows everyone to get involved. The woman will receive a dramatic reaffirmation of her value to her family and the kinsgroup as a whole. This is no longer an act of intervention into other's affairs, but rather an act of group solidarity, defending one of its members against the wrath of the ancestors. If the possessed woman is not protected she will die because the ancestor will force her to commit suicide.

The group is also mobilizing to protect itself. The group's ancestors, by possessing the woman, or allowing wild ancestors to possess her, are showing their displeasure with the group as a whole. The possession is symptomatic of a breakdown in relations with the ancestors. Even if the woman was allowed to kill herself, if the cause of her possession was not discovered and corrected, the group would be beset by further misfortunes, possibly in the form of further suicides.

To prevent her suicide, and further problems, the group restores good relations with their ancestors by discovering the cause of ancestral anger and correcting it with the sacrifice of pigs. But at the same time they may restore the secular balance of the group by reassuring the possessed woman that they sympathize with her distress, and that she is a valued member of the group.

Summary

There is evidence that "supportive interactions among people are protective against the health [including mental health] consequences of life stress (Cobb 1976:300)." Kwaio women can suffer from serious stress due to doubts about their place in, and value to, their communities. These doubts are usually the result of some breakdown in family relations.

A culturally acceptable reaction to such situations, especially for women, is lafulafu possession. Because lafulafu victims are assumed to be suicidal, kin must rally to support them to prevent their death. This evidence of group concern serves to reassure the woman of her importance to the community and may thus result in a reduction of stress. In some cases a lafulafu woman may be

seen to be testing her kin's resolve to protect her. There are several cases of lafulafu women escaping and succeeding or almost succeeding in killing themselves.

Women become lafulafu, and attempt suicide, more than men in reaction to family problems. This is very likely because men have more options available to them in such situations. As noted by the Gegeos in their chapter about Kwara'ae, Kwaio women have much less mobility than men. It is easier for men to change residence than women and non-Christian women are also forbidden by men from leaving the Kwaio area. In contrast, men frequently leave for long periods of time in order to escape family conflicts such as marital troubles or fights with senior kin which are the same type that often lead to women being lafulafu.

NOTES

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1. My wife and I were working with the Kwaio at the Kwaio Cultural Centre at Ngarinaasuru above Sinalagu Harbor. The Cultural Centre project was established by the Kwaio with the help of Dr. Roger Keesing of The Australian National University.
2. This information was given to me in 1981 by Mike Clark, then a provincial doctor and head of the Mental Health Unit on Malaita.
3. It should be noted that suicide was not a major focus of our research in Kwaio, and there were undoubtedly many suicides in the past, which we did not record. Most of our cases surfaced in relation to other topics.
4. For a more in-depth look at women's roles in Kwaio, readers are referred to "Ni Geni," a paper by Roger Keesing (1984) which includes transcripts of statements made by the women themselves.
5. Men more often suffer from a kind of possession called kakaru in which the threat of suicide is not always involved.
6. I once caused a panic by foolishly offering my walking staff to a lafulafu woman who asked for it claiming she was having trouble standing. Unbeknownst to me she had earlier struck another man with a piece of firewood.

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Table 1

Implied or Actually Given Reasons for Suicides in Kwaio

Female:

(in myth)	Sorcery	Possession	Fear	Revenge	Grief	Shame	Mistreatment by close kin
1.	X						
2.	X						
3.	X						
4.	X						
5.	X						

(pre-1927)

6.					X		
7.						X	X
8.				X		X	
9.						X	X

(post 1943)

10.							X
11.					X		
12.							X
13.							X
14.		X					
15.		X					
16.		X					
17.							X
18.	X						
19.						X	X
20.					X		

Male:

(post 1943)	Sorcery	Possession	Fear	Revenge	Grief	Shame	Mistreatment by close kin
1.						X*	
2.		X					
3.			X				
4.		X					
5.		X					X
6.			X				X
7.		X					
8.		X					
9. (no reason given)							
10. (no reason given)							

*This was disputed by some informants who said there must have been some hidden reason for the suicide.