

MICRONESIA'S HANGING SPREE

Thomas, a 19 year old high school dropout, bounded down the path away from his house, his face flushed with anger and shame. He had just scuffled with his older brother in a quarrel that arose over some silly little matter. In the heat of his anger at his brother, he had hurled a metal rod that accidentally struck a passing girl on the head. She had fallen to the ground crying and his parents, who had been watching the entire incident, had just severely scolded him for his stupidity. This was too much: first the beating by his brother and then the reproaches from his parents. His family watched him run off. When he did not return after an hour or two they sent someone to look for him, but he was nowhere to be found. It was shortly after sunrise the next morning when they discovered his lifeless body suspended from the branch of a breadfruit tree near an uncle's house. Thomas had hanged himself during the night.

Thomas was only one of the 23 Micronesians, most of them young like himself, who are known to have taken their own lives during the year between the summers of 1975 and 1976.* Suicide, which has been a growing problem in the Trust Territory for some years, has reached epidemic proportions within the last year and a half. Today it is the number one cause of death among Micronesians between the ages of 15 and 30, surpassing auto accidents, gastro-intestinal diseases, and heart disease as a killer.

Suicide has also become an ordinary topic of conversation among the young who more than ever before seem to be able to discuss it openly and dispassionately as an option in trying circumstances. It may even be the basis for a cult. Now and then one sees on the back of a T-shirt a picture of a noose with an appropriate slogan scrawled below, where formerly one would have seen only the usual

*There may well have been more, perhaps as many as 30. In the absence of reliable official statistics on suicides, however, students and staff at Xavier compiled a list of all individuals known to them as having taken their own lives during the previous year. This list was then checked with other informants outside the school, particularly from Truk, and corrected where necessary. Nick Benjamin, a student researcher, then set out to gather further information on the victims and on the circumstances surrounding each death. The result is the basic data used in this paper.

protestation of adolescent love. Unfortunately, suicide appears to be an accepted fact of life in Micronesia.

Not that suicide is a newcomer to the islands! The traditional folklore has its tales of sweethearts, promised by obdurate parents to others in marriage, leaping hand in hand from spectacular heights; of old men, broken in health and spirit, paddling away in canoes never to be seen again; of shamed young men jumping from coconut trees before the eyes of their families. One might suppose, however, that such incidents were rather infrequent. There is also a touch of the heroic element, at least to our eyes today, in many of these tales. As the stories are passed down to us, they usually portray men and women who were driven to the extreme measure by a sense of real desperation that we can understand, even if not endorse.

We have only to look at a few typical suicides during the past year to sense the contrast. There is the 16-year old boy who, when refused the dollar that he had begged from his father, ominously replied that his father would soon be spending a hundred dollars or more—on his funeral—and then hanged himself. A boy of barely 13 was found dead after arguing with a sister who had taken his flashlight without his consent. Another teenager took his own life when his mother continued to ignore his complaints that there was no food prepared for him after he had returned from a drinking bout with his friends. Clearly this is not the stuff out of which grand tragedy is usually made, either in folklore or in real life. And yet each of these incidents ended in the self-destruction of a young man. Reasons seemingly every bit as trifling as these have accounted for the deaths of many others during recent years, as the information we have gathered shows.

A glance at this information reveals some striking patterns in suicides that have taken place in the past year. The vast majority of the victims, 18 out of 23, were young people between the ages of 16 and 26. Two others were in their early teens, and the remaining three in their 30s or 40s. Figures on previous years as well bear out the fact that suicide is manifestly a youth problem, affecting the same age group that shows the highest rate of arrests and the greatest incidence of serious drinking problems.

Suicide is largely a phenomenon that occurs among young males. Last year all but two of the victims were men or boys, and in previous years nearly all

victims have been males. Recent records, however, have begun to show a startling number of unsuccessful attempts on their own lives made by females. That relatively few of these attempts actually end in death might be explained by the fact that, while men ordinarily hang themselves, women usually imbibe Clorox, kerosene or some other toxic substance. They are often found and treated in time to save them. But even allowing for the surprising number of female attempts on their lives in recent years, suicide remains preponderantly a male phenomenon in the Trust Territory today.

With over half of the 23 suicides occurring in Truk, this district has acquired the unenviable title of the suicide capital of Micronesia, a distinction that was for years held by the Marshalls. On the island of Dublon alone, with a population of 2,400, there were five suicides last year, all occurring within a four-month period. Although only two of these suicides were known to be directly related to one another, the suspicion naturally arises that there was more than mere chance at work here. One wonders, for instance, whether the ten-year old boy who hanged himself towards the end of this four-month period would have done so if he had not had recent models to emulate. No such question need be asked in the case of the talented composer of local songs who travelled from his home across the lagoon to visit the burial place of his best friend. His friend, a youth in his mid-twenties, had taken his own life about a month earlier after he was scolded by his family for smashing windows while drunk. At the end of his three-day stay with the family of his dead friend, the young composer sneaked out by evening and hanged himself over the grave of his former companion.

The Marshalls may have been beaten out by Truk last year in the suicide race, but authorities there have for some years recognized suicide as a major concern in that district. A report from Health Services Department lists 22 suicide cases between the years 1967 and 1973, and in all probability there are others that have gone unreported. The pattern for these earlier suicides is a familiar one. With the exception of two persons, all the victims were living on either Ebeye or Majuro when they took their own lives. All were males, all but three fell in the 16-26 age bracket, and most were intoxicated at the time that they decided to take their own lives. Moreover, the vast majority had just had a falling out with a spouse, close relative or friend prior to their death. The only novelty in the data

for this period is the rather large number of women who are reported to have made unsuccessful attempts on their own lives during this period: six on Ebeye alone.

Over the past few years, the Marshalls seems to be averaging four or five suicides annually, an increase over the three per year that the district averaged during the years 1967-73. Ponape has had a comparable number during the years 1973-1976, with an average of four suicides annually. Unlike the case of the Marshalls, however, the incidence of suicide on Ponape has only recently reached critical proportions. Otherwise, the pattern of suicides in Ponape closely resembles that of the Marshalls and Truk in age and sex distribution of victims and the circumstances of death.

When compared with the eastern districts, the suicide figures for the western part of Micronesia seem to be modest. Palau, Yap and the Marianas each had only a single victim during the year under study. Our data shows only six suicides on Yap since 1973, and one of these was a Japanese tourist who was thought to have performed a ritual self-immolation near the bones of his fallen countrymen from the last war. Our information from Palau reveals four victims over the past two years. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from such scant data, and it is anyone's guess whether we shall see the same dramatic increase of suicide in these districts as elsewhere in Micronesia.

Overall, it is safe to say that suicide, especially "juvenile" suicide among the 16-26 age group, has grown into a problem of alarming proportions within recent years. The suicide rate in the Trust Territory for the past year, according to the index commonly used for comparative purposes, was 20 per 100,000 people. That of Guam during the turbulent 30-year period towards the end of the last century (1861-1891), according to information gleaned from the records of the Spanish Padre Ibanez del Carmen, was on the average 10 per 100,000. Over the past 20 years, the suicide rate in the United States has jumped from 5 to 10, but it is currently still only half that of the Trust Territory. If the suicide rate is any real measure of the health of a society, then Micronesia is clearly ailing.

In the United States, interestingly enough, the suicide rate has in past years increased with the age of the population group. Thus, Americans over 50 years old had a suicide rate that is about double that of young people under 25 years of age. Does this reflect the fact that until recently it has been the old, not the young, who have found themselves most alienated? It should be noted, however, that since

1960 the suicide rate among college-age Americans has increased to a high 10 per 100,000, and social scientists in the U.S. are sounding the alarm. Nevertheless, the rate among the same group (16-26) in Micronesia during the past year would have been a whopping 70 per 100,000—an astonishingly high figure by standards anywhere in the world. The evidence, then, seems to plainly show that it is the youth who are the most alienated segment of society in Micronesia today—at least if one accepts the supposition that suicide figures can be a valid indicator of social instability.

Why are so many young people in Micronesia killing themselves today? First we might answer this negatively by saying: not for the reasons that we might expect would compel persons to take this fatal step. None of the suicide victims in recent years was suffering extreme physical pain; and very few, as far as we know, either had a history of mental disorder or seemed to bear long and unupportable burdens of grief or anxiety. A rare exception was a young man, said to be mentally unstable, who announced to his relatives after the death of his father that before long he would be lying alongside him and made good his promise when after a drinking bout one evening shortly afterwards he put a rifle to his head. There are almost none of the classic cases of frustrated love in which a boy or girl who longs to marry a certain individual is prevented from doing so by his parents. There are no cases in which a person's academic or occupational failure was the immediate cause of suicide, as would be common in a country like Japan. Those signs of hopelessness and despair that one might expect to find in suicide victims are conspicuously absent. Even by the strange logic of self-destruction, it is difficult to explain most of the suicides in the Trust Territory today.

Virtually all the suicides—with a few clear exceptions—were precipitated by an argument or misunderstanding between the victim and someone very close to him: in some cases his wife or girlfriend, occasionally his friends or drinking companions, but more often members of his own family. Sometimes suspicions of his spouse's infidelity seem to have been the immediate cause of suicide, but more commonly it was something as apparently trivial as a quarrel over a flashlight, the refusal by a parent or relative to give money or food upon request, ridicule by friends over a misdeed, or a fight with a relative or a neighbor. The case of Thomas cited at the beginning of this paper is typical of most of the suicides that occur in the Trust Territory today. The usual sequence of events is easily

identified. There is first the quarrel or the scuffle with friends or family; the emotions of anger, shame and perhaps self-pity that are triggered by the incident; the drinking that sometimes, but not always, either precedes or follows the quarrel; and the actual suicide, ordinarily by strangulation from hanging.

It is understandable that Micronesians, for whom rewarding and permanent personal bonds with family and community are so important, might react so strongly to a serious threat of rupture in these bonds as to take their own lives. But does a parent's refusal to lend his son the car for the evening actually represent such a threat in the eyes of his son? Can a flare-up with an older brother and a chiding by parents really be interpreted by a teenage boy to mean that those closest to him no longer love him, and that he might just as well destroy himself as endure a meaningless existence? Or is the absence of a wife or lover for a short period of time the conclusive proof that she has been unfaithful to the young man or no longer cares for him? One certainly gets the impression that the desperate final act that the suicide victim takes is out of all proportion to the trifling incident that so often precipitates it.

Some would say that the decisive factor in the whole tragic situation is the effect of alcohol on the victim's emotions and judgment. They point to the fact that a large majority of those who take their own lives are intoxicated when they do so. Unquestionably alcohol helps to aggravate the unpleasant confrontation between the victim and his friends or family in cases where he is drunk before the trouble occurs. Just as alcohol releases pent-up feelings in the drinker, it also stifles inhibitions and fears that might normally prevent a person from taking the final step and so fortifies his resolve to carry out his decision. But it does not explain what has prompted him to commit suicide in the first place. Although the influence of alcohol may well magnify his emotional reaction, it does not account for the presence of the deep-seated feelings that are eventually vented in the suicide itself and often in the unpleasant incident that triggers it. Anyone who is at all familiar with the pattern of drinking in the Trust Territory knows that drinking is just as often the result of a violent inner emotional upheaval as it is the cause of the display of such an upheaval. In other words, it is just as frequently true that a person drinks because he is angry as it is that a person is angry because he is drunk. Moreover, the fact remains that not all suicide victims are drunk when they take their own lives. Alcohol, then, seems to be only a contributing factor rather than the cause of suicides.

Suicide cannot be adequately explained either by the drinking or by the family quarrel that occasions it. We can only assume that forces much deeper, and therefore less easily recognized, must be at play in the victim's life if he is driven to such a desperate deed. Human beings do not ordinarily choose to end their own lives out of whimsy even when drunk. I cannot say with convincing certainty what these forces are, for here our factual information ends, but I will advance a line of reasoning that seems to me to offer a partial explanation of the suicide epidemic in Micronesia.

Let us begin with the feelings of anger and shame, and perhaps self-pity as well, that normally surface during the conflict with family or friends prior to the suicide. It would be surprising if these feelings were not very deep-seated and operative in the victim long before the precipitating incident ever occurred. The act of self-destruction is a pathological response to a human situation, and it is logical to suppose that the pathological condition was not developed in the course of a few hours. It seems clear that as a rule only a person whose self-image has been considerably weakened over the course of time could respond to a quarrel or fight with family or friends by killing himself.

But weakened by what? In Micronesia, if anywhere in the world, a positive self-image seems to depend largely on the sense of personal well-being that comes from successfully maintaining satisfying personal relationships with those others who are most important in one's life. It also derives from the knowledge that one can make a meaningful contribution to those persons who matter most. In other words, a person must be loved for what he is and appreciated for what he can do if he is to be a healthy human being. He may fail out of school, his business may go under, his boat may sink and his house be destroyed by a typhoon, and he may lose his government job; but he will not be driven to despair provided that he is assured of the love and respect of those closest to him. When this is withdrawn, he senses that he is a failure: it no longer matters to anyone whether he lives or dies. At this point almost any incident, however insignificant, may serve to confirm this dreadful latent feeling and provide the necessary impetus to commit the final deed.

An integrated and healthy community furnishes the individual with the affection and sense of his own worth that he needs to live a meaningful life. In his monumental study on suicide some eighty years ago, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim showed that members of a cohesive community in which they felt

themselves real participants manifested a low rate of suicide. The rare incidence of suicide in the outer islands of Micronesia today seems to confirm his observation. Of the 12 suicides in Truk District during the past year, none took place in the outer islands. Indeed, the Western Islands of Truk, on which men still wear loincloths and exercise traditional skills, have witnessed only one suicide in the past 24 years, according to the Catholic pastor there, and that was a 60 year old man who was suffering greatly in the advanced stages of terminal cancer. In the outer islands of Yap District, there have been only two known cases in the last 25 years: one of them involving a man from Ifaluk who several years ago hanged himself while angry at his wife, and the other a girl from Fais who took her own life about four years ago when her parents prevented her from marrying the boy of her affections. Whatever may be said of other places, suicide is clearly a very infrequent occurrence in those traditional island communities that remain tight-knit.

Most communities in Micronesia today have suffered from an erosion that has left them less cohesive, less unified in their values, less dependent on the cooperation of individual members, and less capable of satisfying the affective needs of their members. It is impossible here to go into the forces that have been responsible for this erosion, but the result has been a diminished sense of participation by individuals in what was once a corporate enterprise. Naturally enough, those who are affected most by the breakdown of the integrated community are the young, who are just in the process of discovering what their community expects of them and testing the strength of their ties with others in the community. It is the young whose self-image is most fragile and whose sense of identity is weakest. Among the young are some whose sense of confidence in their own worth as persons is especially weak, who are more uncertain than most of the love and respect of their families and peers. It is these who are the most likely candidates for suicide.

Let us have a look at the plight of the family, the most basic and crucial of communities. Over the past years the Micronesian family has gradually relinquished to other agencies many of the roles that it once exercised on behalf of its members. The school has assumed the responsibility for educating and even feeding its children. The police station and the court have increasingly taken on the responsibility of restraining them and correcting them when they misbehave.

The hospital or dispensary cares for them when they are indisposed. Government recreation boards are assigned the task of occupying them during their leisure, and the government administration is expected to employ them during their working hours. No wonder parents feel their direct control over their young slipping away!

But there is still one essential role that the family plays in the life of the young: that of furnishing love and affective support. As of today at least there has been created no government agency that is able to provide this. And yet it is just this that many families, fully aware of their impotence in these other areas and themselves lacking the necessary cohesiveness, are no longer in a position to supply. In place of the effective controls that they once exercised over the young, many parents and older relatives now have resort to the only weapon that appears to be left in their arsenal: continual nagging. They are constantly chiding their sons for being worthless louts. The young man who has dropped out of school or lost his job is all too well aware that this is what he is, at least by standards commonly accepted by the rest of society. To make matters worse, his sense of personal uselessness is often compounded by the absence of meaningful work for the family or the community. Is he really expected to pound breadfruit, farm or fish if food needs can be met in other ways? Does his family expect anything of him at all? If so, will they have the strength to make demands on him? Or will he be permitted to spend his days in the pool hall and his evenings in the bar, while being written off as a bum? As the ties of mutual love and respect that bound him to members of his family and his community dissolve, the young man's lack of self-esteem gives rise to anger at those who have refused to accept him, shame at his own worthlessness, and a profound self-pity. For some this is literally one step away from the grave.

If many suicides in Micronesia are a final act of despair by a person whose life has become intolerable as his most meaningful relations have deteriorated, they are not only this. They are a thinly disguised act of aggression as well. The violent deed may be perpetrated against oneself, but the actual intended victims are frequently the parents, family or friends of the person who takes his own life. The young boy who swore to his father that he would soon have to spend a large sum of money because he refused him a mere dollar simply articulated a revenge motive that is implicit in many other cases. "I'll get back at you by destroying myself" is seen as a particularly effective way of avenging insults or blows from

close relatives or friends. The rage that is present in the victim finds its most extreme expression in suicide, and also its most exquisite revenge. The victim knows that his survivors will have to continually savor the bitter shame and grief of knowing that they caused his death. Even if he hangs himself with the expectation that he will be cut down by someone before he strangles to death, he will have succeeded in shaming those who are to blame for his wounded pride.

In some Micronesian cultures, particularly in eastern Micronesia, indirect forms of vengeance are frequently employed to get back at offending parties. It is not at all unusual to shame with exaggerated displays of kindness a person who has done one some injury, thereby "heaping burning coals upon his head." There are in Truk and in Ponape instances in which the mother of a murdered son sought to adopt in her dead son's place the young man who killed him. Is this an exalted form of Christian forgiveness, or is it a subtle form of revenge in which the murderer is condemned to be forever reminded of his guilt by the continual presence of his victim's mother? It is certainly not inconceivable that suicide too is an indirect means of lashing back at those against those who are the objects of the victim's anger.

The tentative analysis that I have offered here goes well beyond the limited data with which the paper began. But if it is at all accurate, then certain conclusions follow immediately. In the first place, the suicide epidemic in Micronesia is only the symptom of a much broader problem, and it will be impossible to check it through such partial measures as setting up counseling or referral centers, establishing recreation programs and job training centers, and providing additional employment for the "disadvantaged". The solution to the suicide problem will require nothing short of restored, revitalized and reintegrated communities at various levels in society. The individual is shaped for good or bad by his community, and mounting evidence attests to the fact that there is something seriously wrong with the way our communities presently function in Micronesia. We might seriously ask ourselves what forces are responsible for the disintegration of our families and communities today, and what can be done to mend them in the future.

If we neglect to do this, we are almost certain to see Thomas' tragedy repeated more and more frequently in the years to come. In that case, the only sensible advice that might be offered to parents is to keep ropes, kerosene cans and Clorox bottles well hidden.