# Suicide and the Micronesian Family

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For more than a decade a handful of scholars have been keeping a constant but helpless watch as suicide rates in Micronesia have risen to apparently unprecedented heights. We have tried to identify all suicides in the area since 1960, gathering data from a variety of case records on the victims and establishing a computerized file that has been regularly updated. We have also participated in perhaps a dozen full-fledged conferences and innumerable informal sessions on the problem, always in the hope of finding some viable sociological explanation for this mysterious and tragic social phenomenon. To provide a sharper focus for our research, which we knew would have to take full account of the cultural features having a bearing on suicide, we decided to concentrate for a time on Truk, an island group in the geographical center of Micronesia with a population of 50,000 (see Appendix) and one of the highest suicide rates in the area. My principal colleague, Donald Rubinstein, a cultural anthropologist, carried on a three-year ethnographic study that yielded several papers (Rubinstein 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987). I have incorporated the results of his work into two summary articles (Hezel 1984b, 1987), which have exposed the tight cultural patterning of Trukese suicides and offered a plausible hypothesis about the social changes that have given rise to the suicide epidemic of the past twenty years. In this article I will attempt to apply and extend our findings on Truk to other parts of Micronesia, allowing for cultural differences, in an attempt to grasp that elusive sociological explanation.

The first dramatic increase in suicides in Micronesia occurred in the early 1970s (Table 1). The term *Micronesia* is used here to designate the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (Yap, Truk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae). Our data for the 1960s,

Table 1.   Suicides in Micronesia by Island Group, 1960–1987

| Year | Palau | Yap | Truk | Pohnpei | Kosrae | Marshalls | Total |
|------|-------|-----|------|---------|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1960 | 4 | 1 | 1 | — | — | — | 6 |
| 1961 | 1 | — | — | — | — | — | 1 |
| 1962 | 2 | — | — | — | — | — | 2 |
| 1963 | 2 | — | 1 | — | — | — | 3 |
| 1964 | 1 | — | 1 | 1 | — | — | 3 |
| 1965 | 2 | — | 2 | — | — | — | 4 |
| 1966 | 1 | 1 | 1 | — | — | 1 | 4 |
| 1967 | — | — | 2 | — | — | 3 | 5 |
| 1968 | 1 | — | 2 | — | — | 1 | 4 |
| 1969 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 9 |
| 1970 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | — | 2 | 13 |
| 1971 | 1 | — | 4 | — | — | 6 | 11 |
| 1972 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 1 | — | 4 | 17 |
| 1973 | — | 2 | 5 | 2 | — | 4 | 13 |
| 1974 | 3 | 1 | 10 | 3 | — | 4 | 21 |
| 1975 | 5 | 2 | 12 | 8 | — | 7 | 34 |
| 1976 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 5 | — | 3 | 19 |
| 1977 | 1 | 2 | 11 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 24 |
| 1978 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 31 |
| 1979 | 7 | 2 | 19 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 38 |
| 1980 | 4 | 3 | 18 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 41 |
| 1981 | 3 | 5 | 18 | 2 | 0 | 9 | 37 |
| 1982 | 4 | 4 | 13 | — | 1 | 4 | 26 |
| 1983 | 4 | 4 | 13 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 32 |
| 1984 | 7 | 2 | 15 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 31 |
| 1985 | 3 | 2 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 8 | 28 |
| 1986 | 3 | 0 | 15 | 3 | 1 | 10 | 32 |
| 1987 | 2 | 1 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 20 | 43 |
| TOTAL | 75 | 47 | 209 | 64 | 14 | 123 | 532 |

*Source:* Data compiled by Hezel and Rubinstein for Micronesian Seminar.

which might be incomplete, show an annual suicide rate for the general population of about 5 per 100,000. This is comparable to the overall rate of 8 per 100,000 recorded during the 1920s and 1930s by the Japanese government that then administered the islands (Purcell 1987, 8). There is nothing to suggest that the intervening period of the 1940s and 1950s, on which we lack reliable data, had a higher incidence of suicide than the decades immediately before and after. By the early 1970s the rate had risen to 10.8 per 100,000, and it rose even more rapidly to 21.7 by the mid-seventies, peaking at 28.2 by the early 1980s (Table 2). Subsequently the rate dropped to 25.8, approximately the same as in the late seventies. The overall epidemiological picture is of a sharply rising suicide rate during the 1970s, followed by what seems to be a slow decline during the present decade. It may be significant that the pattern of change in rates for Micronesia as a whole closely resembles that for Truk, the largest of the island groups in the area and the one that serves as our paradigm in this research (Table 2). The pattern also resembles the graph of the suicide epidemic in Western Samoa that bears many similarities to the Micronesian situation (Figure 1).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SUICIDES

Although the island groups in Micronesia show considerable variation in their rates of suicide over time (Table 3), they share a number of common features. Suicide everywhere is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon: male victims outnumber female by a ratio of more than 11:1. The age of the typical victim is young, with a median age of 22 and a concentration of nearly 60 percent of the victims in the 15–24 age bracket (Rubinstein n.d.). The distribution of suicides in terms of both age and sex has narrowed significantly since the onset of the recent epidemic, prior to which the male: female ratio was between 3:1 and 5:1 and the median age was about 30 (ibid). During the past ten years the average annual rates for the group at highest risk, males aged 15–24, ranged from 70 per 100,000 in Palau to 206 per 100,000 in Truk (ibid). By far the most common method of suicide is hanging, with many of the victims slipping their head into a noose while standing or seated and leaning forward into the rope until they pass into unconsciousness and die of lack of oxygen. More than 80 percent of the suicides are carried out in this way, and this figure varies little from one island group to another. Among the other means employed are inges-

Table 2.   Numbers and Rates of Suicides by Four-year Periods for Micronesia and Truk, 1960–1987

| Period | Micronesia | | | Truk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Average per year | Rate per 100,000 | Total | Average per year | Rate per 100,000 |
| 1960–1963 | 12 | 3.00 | 4.3 | 2 | 0.50 | 2.3 |
| 1964–1967 | 16 | 4.00 | 5.2 | 6 | 1.50 | 5.7 |
| 1968–1971 | 37 | 9.25 | 10.8 | 11 | 2.75 | 9.8 |
| 1972–1975 | 85 | 21.25 | 21.7 | 33 | 8.25 | 26.1 |
| 1976–1979 | 112 | 28.00 | 25.5 | 44 | 11.00 | 30.9 |
| 1980–1983 | 136 | 34.00 | 28.2 | 62 | 15.50 | 38.8 |
| 1984–1987 | 134 | 33.50 | 25.8 | 51 | 12.75 | 28.3 |

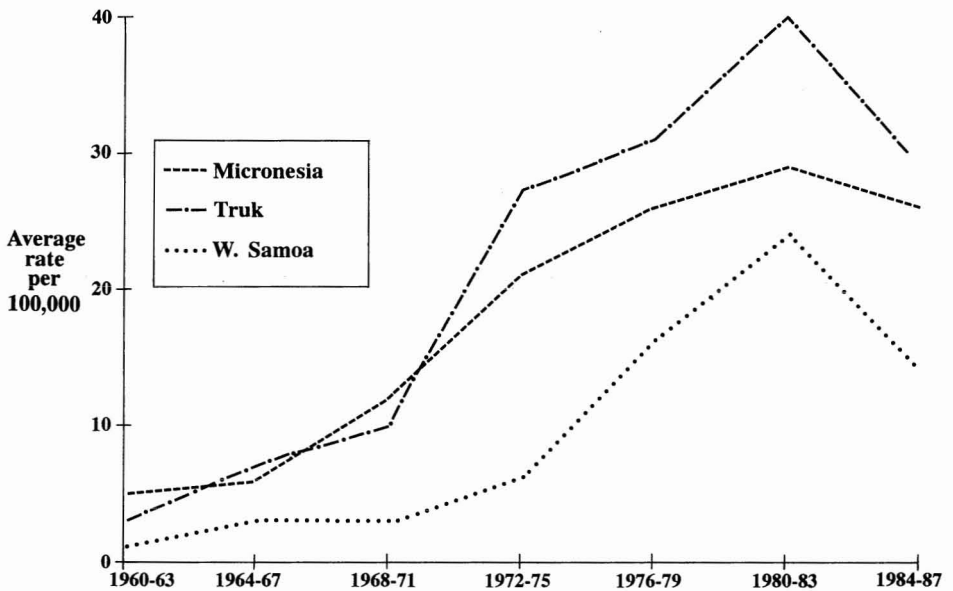*Source:* Data compiled by Hezel and Rubinstein for Micronesian Seminar.



FIGURE I. Average suicide rates per 100,000 in Micronesia, Truk, and Western Samoa for four-year periods, 1960–1987.

Table 3.   Suicide Rates by Island Group and Four-year Periods, 1960–1987
(Per Hundred Thousand)

| Period | Palau | Yap* | Truk | Pohnpei | Kosrae | Marshalls |
|--------|-------|------|------|---------|--------|-----------|
| 1960–1963 | 23.0 | 6.6 | 2.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 1964–1967 | 9.1 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 1.6 | 0.0 | 5.5 |
| 1968–1971 | 20.8 | 18.8 | 9.8 | 2.9 | 6.9 | 11.9 |
| 1972–1975 | 18.1 | 43.3 | 26.1 | 18.1 | 0.0 | 19.5 |
| 1976–1979 | 25.0 | 40.9 | 30.9 | 22.4 | 16.7 | 20.0 |
| 1980–1983 | 30.2 | 60.3 | 38.8 | 10.6 | 19.2 | 22.7 |
| 1984–1987 | 28.8 | 20.2 | 28.3 | 16.7 | 25.9 | 26.5 |

*Source:* Data compiled by Hezel and Rubinstein for Micronesian Seminar.
*Yap rates are for the high island of Yap only and do not include the outer islands, an area that is culturally distinct and has had very low rates of suicide.

tion of medicine or other poisons, gunshot, and drowning. In more than 40 percent of the cases, the victim is either intoxicated or drinking heavily at the time of death, although this is less often true of females and younger boys.

Micronesian suicides follow a familiar pattern regardless of where they occur. In one typical case, a seventeen-year-old boy who had often complained that his family did not love him injured his younger brother in a fight and was severely scolded by his parents for this act. Shortly afterward he got drunk and hanged himself outside his house. Another young man from a different island was ordered by his father to work in the family garden even after he remonstrated that he had other plans that day. After the family had left to attend a community celebration, he dug up the garden and then hanged himself. An eighteen-year-old from still another island group committed suicide shortly before his graduation when his request for money from his parents went unheeded. One young man in his early twenties, who is representative of many others, took his life when his family refused to allow his marriage to a girl with whom he had been living for almost two years, and who had already borne him a child. Another young man hanged himself after a prolonged drinking bout following an aunt's discovery that he had been making sexual advances toward a girl in

the household who was his classificatory sister. Boys in their early teens have hanged themselves for similar reasons: one in anger at his mother for giving away a pet dog, another in shame and terror at injuring an uncle with a rock he had thrown, and a third for fear he would be beaten for returning home late after watching video. Old men occasionally take their own lives, as in the case of a seventy-eight-year-old invalid who resented his family's neglect of him, and a seventy-three-year-old asthmatic whose wife would not let his children by a first marriage visit him in the hospital.

Even a cursory examination of the case data reveals that Micronesian suicides exhibit an etiology markedly different from that associated with suicide in the West. There is almost none of the chronic depression, the vague sense that life is meaningless, or even the despondency at failure in business or school that seems to play such a large part in suicides in other parts of the world. Micronesian suicides are manifestly interpersonal in nature, occasioned by what is perceived as a disruption in a significant relationship. What I have written of Truk suicides applies as well to Micronesian suicides in general: "The suicides are almost always triggered by some conflict, actual or anticipated, between the victim and a parent, an older relative (including an older sibling), or occasionally a spouse" (Hezel 1987, 284). Older victims are often offended by their children or other younger persons who are expected to care for them.

Micronesian suicides are tightly patterned responses to very specific situations. Everywhere in Micronesia, the dominant emotion at play in suicide is anger (Table 4). Usually the victim takes his own life after he is denied a request, chastised, or rebuffed in some way by parents or an older sibling. Inasmuch as Micronesian cultures place strong sanctions on the direct expression of negative feelings toward a parent or older authority, the offended party can choose either to suffer in silence or to act out his anger upon himself by suicide or such nonlethal means as cutting himself with a knife or refusing to eat for a time. Many of the suicides in recent years have been by young men or women who, although acting impulsively, had nursed a grievance toward their family for months or even years. The imbroglio that precedes a death is often merely the latest, but decisive, expression of tension between the individuals and their families. Yet their act of self-destruction, as I have noted elsewhere (Hezel 1987, 285), is not a gesture of blind rage, much less a defiant retaliation against the family; rather, attempted suicide is seen by Micronesians as a poignant plea for understanding and reconciliation with the family. In a

Table 4.   Causes of Suicide by Island Groups, 1960–1987
           (Percentages)

| Cause | Palau | Yap | Truk | Pohnpei | Kosrae* | Marshalls |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anger | 50 | 60 | 72 | 76 | 58 | 85 |
| Shame or fear | 10 | 27 | 17 | 15 | 8 | 4 |
| Mental illness | 34 | 13 | 6 | 7 | 33 | 2 |
| Others | 6 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 9 |
| SUBTOTAL: $N$ = | 62 | 30 | 193 | 59 | 12 | 91 |
| Missing (%) | 17 | 36 | 8 | 8 | 14 | 26 |
| TOTAL: $N$ = | 75 | 47 | 209 | 64 | 14 | 123 |

*Source:* Data compiled by Hezel and Rubinstein for Micronesian Seminar.
*Note:* Percentages for the different causes are for known cases only, and might change appreciably if "missing" causes could be incorporated.
*Because of the small population base and relatively low rate, Kosrae is not included in the discussion.

small minority of cases, perhaps 13 percent overall, the break in family ties is caused not by other members of the family, but by the victim himself, who is ashamed of something he has done to offend the family and fears the disruption in his relationship with the family that his action may cause. The young boy who injured his uncle with a rock he threw, and the youth who was discovered making sexual advances toward his classificatory sister are examples of this pattern of suicide.

Conflict between the victim and an older member of the family, whether caused by one or the other, is the context in which the vast majority of Micronesian suicides occur today as in the past. Whatever the cultural differences between island groups in the area, this pattern of suicide, described more fully in other works (Hezel 1984b, 1987), can be seen as the basic etiological stratum in each island culture in Micronesia.

Such fragmentary historical sources as are available on suicide in earlier times all concur that the nearly universal reason for suicide was trouble with one's family. The several suicides on Pohnpei in the period of social upheaval following the smallpox epidemic in 1854 were all attributed by

the missionaries to conflicts with other family members (ABCFM: Sturges, 26 Oct 1858). A spate of five suicides within the three-year period 1838–1841 on one of the Gilbert Islands was ascribed to the same reason: "offense taken at the conduct of some person, whom affection or fear renders them unwilling to injure" (Wilkes 1845, 5:107). Suicide as a response to grievances suffered at the hands of the family may be assumed to be a very old and very strong pattern throughout Micronesia. The dominant etiological patterns that show up here and in the Gilbert Islands are evident in recent suicide data for Western Samoa (Macpherson and Macpherson 1985).

Such variation as occurs within Micronesia today seems to be an overlay on this foundational pattern. Table 5 indicates that in Truk and Pohnpei about half of the suicides were occasioned by difficulties with real or adoptive parents. Another 21 percent for Truk and 16 percent for Pohnpei represent conflict with older siblings, toward whom a younger member of the family is obliged to show submission and a respectful social distance. Problems with an aunt or uncle, who were traditionally important authority figures in the family, constitute a very small percentage of the total. Overall, in 70 percent of the Truk suicides and in an almost equal percentage of the Pohnpei suicides the problematic relationship is with either a parent or an older sibling. Anger or jealousy toward a spouse or lover accounts for a relatively low percentage of the Truk and Pohnpei suicides, in contrast with those in other places. This is not surprising, since men are entitled to express anger at their wives quite directly; there is no cultural reason for them to suppress these emotions or redirect them, as is required toward older blood relations. Truk and Pohnpei may be viewed as embodying more clearly than the other island groups prototypical cultural patterns governing suicide in Micronesia.

Palau, Yap, and the Marshall Islands show a significantly lower percentage of suicides motivated by difficulties with parents or older siblings, although none of these places shows any indication of more serious problems with other older relatives such as aunts or uncles than Truk or Pohnpei. The basic pattern of suicide is prominent in the case reports from Palau, Yap, and the Marshalls, but there is also a significant number of departures from the norm. A large percentage of the suicides in the Marshalls (41%), and a smaller but still considerable percentage in Palau (27%), are occasioned by conflicts with a spouse or lover (Table 5). This is rather startling given that, despite sanctions against interpersonal vio-

Table 5.    Relational Disruptions Leading to Suicide
            (Percentages)

| Relationship | Palau | Yap | Truk | Pohnpei | Kosrae* | Marshalls |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parents | 34 | 42 | 49 | 52 | 37 | 38 |
| Older Sibling | 10 | 7 | 21 | 16 | 0 | 9 |
| Parent's Sibling | 2 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 13 | 4 |
| Spouse or lover | 27 | 12 | 12 | 13 | 13 | 41 |
| Others in family | 5 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Nonfamily | 22 | 23 | 6 | 9 | 37 | 7 |
| SUBTOTAL: $N =$ | 41 | 30 | 154 | 56 | 8 | 81 |
| Missing (%) | 45 | 41 | 26 | 13 | 43 | 34 |
| TOTAL: $N =$ | 75 | 51 | 209 | 64 | 14 | 123 |

*Source:* Data compiled by Hezel and Rubinstein for Micronesian Seminar.
*Because of the small population base and relatively low rate, Kosrae is not included in the discussion.

lence, men have usually been permitted to express displeasure toward and even beat their wives as they felt circumstances required. The offended woman could always leave her husband to take up residence with her own kin, but such an event, although it could be painful, was by no means catastrophic for either party. "Suicide from unhappy love is rare," a missionary working in the Marshalls at the beginning of the century observed. "In general, frustrated love finds enough opportunities of soothing the affliction by means of a new love" (Erdland 1914, 133). Such information as is available from elsewhere in Micronesia on suicides in a much earlier age seems to confirm his observations. There were a number of cases in which men took their lives when their family failed to ask for the hand of a girl with whom they were in love, or when their own family either intervened to break up their marriage or taunted them afterward about their loss, but the real issue in these cases was the victim's anger toward his own kin rather than his wife. Of the 70 instances of suicides prior to 1960 that are recorded, only 6 appear to have been motivated principally by anger or

jealousy toward a spouse. Of these 6 cases, 3 occurred in Palau, the only Micronesian society in which there appears to have been a long-standing tradition of "love suicides," if we may believe Kubary (1900, 31). There were none in the Marshalls.

Despite the rarity in the past of what may be called love suicides, they have undeniably become an important feature in the Marshalls and Palau today. It is unclear exactly why a traditional cultural response to conflict within the circle of an individual's senior blood relatives should have now become commonly extended to wives and sweethearts, who were formerly regarded with much greater detachment than was the family. A large number of these recent love suicides seem to have been motivated by sexual jealousy, as when a woman threatened to leave her spouse for another man or when she was suspected of carrying on an affair. It may be significant that in both Palau and the Marshalls it is regarded as unmanly for a male to show any outward expression of sexual jealousy, even privately toward his wife. This is decidedly not the case in Truk, where women are routinely beaten on the mere suspicion of acting in too forward a manner toward other men. The cultural prohibition of manifestations of jealousy by males in the Marshalls and Palau could help explain the extraordinary number of love suicides there, given that suicide is generally a strategy for dealing with negative emotions that may not be directly displayed for cultural reasons. Other factors may be germane too. As one Marshallese who has devoted some years to the study of suicide noted, a wife or sweetheart who leaves her man invariably brings shame on the abandoned man, especially if he initiated the relationship with the woman over the objections of his family. Even love suicides, this Marshallese suggested, have roots that can sometimes be traced to family problems. This may also be true of Palauan love suicides, as a celebrated case many years ago attests. A highborn Palauan who married a woman despite strong protests from his family later hanged himself when his wife ran off with another man, leaving him disgraced in the eyes of his family (Polloi 1985, 125–126).

With regard to the causes of suicide as shown in Table 5, the sizable percentage of cases for Palau and Yap listed as "nonfamily" must be understood very differently for each place. More than any other island group Palau shows a significant percentage of suicides—roughly one-third of the total (Table 4)—attributed chiefly to the mental illness of the victim. Often the victim appears to take his own life to put an end to his sufferings, but even in these suicides, a motivational component is the victim's anxiety to

be free of the chaos in his personal relationships that his illness has created. A smaller number of such cases is to be found in every island group (Table 4). The relatively large percentage of "nonfamily" cases in Yap, while reflecting a rather high incidence of suicide attributable to mental illness, also points to the importance of extrafamilial relationships in motivating suicide. It would seem that in Yap shame in the face of the wider community, especially the village, is a much greater factor in suicide than it is anywhere else.

## SOCIAL CHANGE AND SUICIDE

Historical sources show that suicide was known in every part of Micronesia. Such cultural features as the introversion of anger directed at those of superior status, the cultivation of bravery and indifference to death in the young, and the fascination with self-inflicted suffering as a proof of love favor suicidal behavior. Nonetheless, there are important differences between suicide as we know of it in earlier times and the phenomenon of the last two decades. First, the suicide rate multiplied dramatically during the 1970s and by the end of that period stood at five times the rate of the previous decade. Second, the increasing rate has been accompanied by an intensified concentration of suicides among young males. Rubinstein's (n.d.) observation that the focus has narrowed in recent years is confirmed by figures for suicides during the Japanese administration that show a much wider distribution in terms of both age and sex (Purcell 1987, 4, 6). Third, recent data show a considerable number of love suicides—occasioned by sexual jealousy or anger at a spouse or sweetheart—in both Palau and the Marshall Islands, with a few occurring in places like Truk and Pohnpei where this type of suicide was almost unknown previously.

What accounts for the rapid escalation in suicide, particularly among young males, since 1970? In discussions and public conferences on the subject, the blame is usually laid on the social changes that are alleged to have turned these island societies upside down. The forces of modernization have created a "youth culture" in present-day Micronesia, unlike anything in the past, that seduces the young while removing them from the normal socialization processes in the family. The complaint is often heard that families have lost their children to this new "youth culture," with its strong peer influence, its emphasis on freedom rather than respect, its long weekend drinking parties, and in the end the sense of hollowness and

boredom that it begets in the young. The same social changes that are drawing youth out from under the control of their families, it is argued, generate innumerable value conflicts between young and old, adding to the tensions in the family. Under such anomic conditions, many maintain, it is no wonder that so many young people seek to escape through suicide.

In the popular explanation for the suicide epidemic, the forces of modernization, as embodied in the "youth culture," seem to be pitted against the values of the family, which represents the core of traditional Micronesian thinking and practice. Yet the data that my colleagues and I have amassed in our research do not confirm this view. In the first place, the victims are not always among the most modernized of the population, at least as measured by conventional standards (Rubinstein 1985, 92–93). Those most at risk are youth from peri-urban areas and social strata that are midway on the scale of modernization. In the port town of Majuro, for instance, the highest rates of suicide seem to be found not among long-time residents who have become acculturated and achieved a fair degree of affluence, but among relatively recent newcomers to the island from outlying atolls. It is true that those remote islands of Micronesia that have retained more of their old lifestyle—for example, the outer islands of Yap, the atolls to the west of Truk, the Polynesian outliers of Pohnpei State, and the more distant atolls of the Marshalls—show very low suicide rates even today. Yet the most highly acculturated segments of urban centers also show fairly low rates. This suggests that suicide is linked with the transition to modernization, with the highest rates in the middle rather than at the low or high ends of the scale.

Suicide employs the very traditional Micronesian strategy of withdrawal from a conflict-laden situation, especially one involving the family. As practiced even today, the act presupposes some degree of acceptance of traditional values on the part of the perpetrator. Those who take their own lives in Micronesia, far from showing themselves to be liberated from the control of their families, are asserting through their deaths that they remain bound to the conventional claims of the family over them. If they had rejected the importance of their family or the authority of their parents, they would not have felt obliged to resort to such an extreme measure as suicide to show their anger or hurt. Suicide is an indication of the importance that the family continues to have in the lives of contemporary young people, even as it suggests that there is something amiss in the fam-

ily. The family should not be seen only as a bulwark against change, but as an institution that has itself been attacked by the worm of change.

The fact that intergenerational value conflicts are a reality in Micronesia today does not constitute an adequate explanation for the suicide epidemic since 1970. The profile of the typical victim is of a generally dutiful and submissive young man who, whatever his difficulties with his family, cannot be branded a rebellious upstart (Hezel 1985, 121). In many instances the victim himself espoused what could be considered the more traditional values in his conflict with his family, as in the example of a young man who ran afoul of his parents for insisting on preparing food for other members of his matrilineage. The most frequent causes of tension reported in the data are parents' denial of food or material support to their children, parents' refusal to approve a marriage partner, and scoldings or other forms of rebuff; but these have always been points of conflict between Micronesian parents and their children. The value conflicts that are a direct outgrowth of modernization have almost certainly contributed to tension in the Micronesian family today, but they do not seem to be the decisive factor in the enormous increase of suicide among the young. In the past it was expected that the family would be able to absorb such conflict and assuage the hurt feelings of contending parties. If it can no longer do so, then the problem may well be that the family no longer functions as it once did.

There are any number of reasons for suspecting that changes in the structure of the Micronesian family have played an important part in bringing about the recent increase in suicides. For one thing the importance of the bonds of family to a Micronesian can scarcely be exaggerated. The individual's sense of well-being or self-esteem has always depended to a far greater extent on the acceptance and support of the family than on any other single element. Not only has the family always served as a buffer for individuals against the vicissitudes of life in society, but the assurance of a firm place in the family has also been a source of self-esteem. To judge from the patterns discernible among recent suicides, this remains true today as well, for suicide is still predominantly a response to the threat of rupture in the family bonds. Over 70 percent of all the suicides since 1960 were precipitated by conflict within the consanguineal family. If the family is no longer able to manage these tensions, this may be because structural changes within it have rendered it less effective. It is most likely that the

key to any increase in suicide, which has always borne an intimate cultural tie to the family, can be found in the family.

This is not to dismiss the importance of other causes, including some already alluded to, in the escalation of suicide rates in the last two decades. In any epidemic the element of contagion serves to explain the rapid spread of the disease, and that element is undeniably strong in recent Micronesian suicides. Moreover, the status of young men in most island societies has possibly been weakened in recent years, making them more vulnerable to suicide as well as to delinquency, alcohol abuse, and other forms of deviance. However, when all factors are considered, it is likely that the profound change in the family structure almost everywhere in Micronesia has been the single most powerful catalyst in the suicide epidemic of the past twenty years.

## THE TRADITIONAL MICRONESIAN FAMILY

Given the cultural diversity of Micronesia, the form of the family has always varied a great deal from one island group to another. Before considering the changes that the family in these societies has undergone and their bearing on suicide, I shall briefly review the traditional family organization in each major island group, with a particular focus on the child-rearing mechanisms. Kosrae has been omitted here because of the early disruption in social organization that occurred in the last century as a result of rapid depopulation and missionization (Hezel 1983, 169–170). I have also omitted from this survey the cultural subfamily embracing the atolls of Yap State, which are totally distinct from the Yap Islands, and the Polynesian outliers of Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi in Pohnpei State, since suicide is still quite rare in these areas. After this survey I shall attempt to make a few pertinent generalizations on the structure of Micronesian families.

### Truk

The basic social unit in Truk, one of the least complex of the Micronesian cultures, was the matrilineage (Goodenough 1961; Gladwin and Saracen 1953). Comprising as many as thirty or forty members and headed by a senior kinsman, the matrilineage provided land, a support group, and a source of identity for all the children of its women. A woman in the lineage who married would ideally bring her husband to her lineage estate

where her lineage mates assisted her in raising her children. Although the father retained considerable authority over his younger children in ordinary matters, they were subject to the general supervision of older members of the matrilineage. Food was prepared by the entire lineage group, cooked in a common hearth, and distributed to the group by the wife's older brother or whoever had been designated the lineage head. Work tasks were assigned to the children by the maternal uncles or the lineage head himself. As young men grew to adolescence, they were required to sleep outside the house in the lineage *uut* 'meetinghouse', where they were instructed together with their peers in the skills and lore a man was expected to possess. During this period they were increasingly brought under the supervision of older lineage members, especially their maternal uncles, while the father adopted a more easygoing attitude toward them. All major decisions, including the choice of a spouse, had to be approved by the seniors in the lineage as well as by the father.

## Pohnpei

Like Truk, Pohnpei was organized along matrilineal lines, but residential groups were usually smaller and newly married couples frequently lived with the husband's family. Often enough several brothers and their families established separate households on a single farmstead, sharing resources and meals on a regular basis (Petersen 1977, 174–175). The maternal uncle *(uhlap)* exercised authority over his nephews and was expected to be their chief disciplinarian. The father's role with respect to his children was far more relaxed. For example, Fischer claimed that a chief could have his son sit on the platform of the meetinghouse next to him, even during a ceremonial occasion, while his nephew was obliged to keep a respectful distance (Fischer and Fischer 1957, 133). However, Fischer also acknowledged that there were instances of a reversal of roles between the father and the maternal uncle, with the maternal uncle at times protecting his nephews from the hard hand of their father. Whatever the case, it appears that the roles of the father and the maternal uncle, who represented the lineage's interest in the child, complemented one another.

## Marshall Islands

Here too was a matrilineal society with considerable flexibility on where a newly married couple would reside. It was rare for the entire lineage

descent group to live on a single piece of land. More often the residential group was built around a nuclear family and included up to three generations housed in separate dwellings but eating together from a single cookhouse. The size of the residential group could vary from three to thirty, but the average size on Majuro in 1948 was nine (Spoehr 1949, 104), while on Kili in 1963 it was fifteen (Kiste 1974, 71–72). However, Marshallese have always shifted with comparative ease among relatives from one household group to another, even on distant parts of the island. Marshallese parents disciplined their own young children, but they seemed to establish a more informal relationship with them as they grew older. The mother's brother *(wulabe),* on the other hand, had a formal relationship with the children, who were expected to show him great deference. He was required to instruct them in customary land law and to provide what the father could not or would not provide (Spoehr 1949, 194). The mother's lineage mates, and to some extent the father's as well, shared authority over the children after they reached adolescence. The young enjoyed an easy relationship with their parents and an even more familiar relationship with their grandparents that allowed them to engage in sexual banter.

## Palau

This society was matrilineal like the preceding ones, but it was normal for a married couple to take up residence on land that the husband inherited from his own lineage. As in many other features of Palauan society, there was an in-built tension: between affiliation with the father's lineage, in which the young person was raised, and the matrilineage, whose claim became increasingly strong as the child grew older (Alkire 1977, 29). The father took a strong hand in disciplining young children, but the maternal uncle *(okdemaol)* was the only one entitled to punish severely or beat the child (Smith 1983, 192). A youth who lived with his father and drank and caused trouble could not easily be corrected at home, since his father would risk criticism for taking liberties with the matrilineage's "property." As a last resort, the delinquent youth might be sent back to his mother's kin, who had a much freer hand in disciplining him. The child's ties with his matrilineage were as strong in Palau as in any Micronesian society. The maternal uncle or some surrogate could call on the young man's labor from adolescence on and was expected to correct any misbehavior, but he was also the one to whom the young person would go to ask a big favor.

One anthropologist commented very tellingly that, despite the demands made by the matrilineal kin, the young person's emotional ties remained strongly with the matrilineal relatives, who would provide support and unconditional acceptance no matter what (Smith 1983, 45). By contrast, the young person's ties with the father's kin were seen as provisional and had to be maintained by hard work.

## Yap

Yapese society is distinctive in that the primary social group was patrilineal, even though the matrilineal descent group formed an important substratum in Yapese social organization. In most cases the household was composed of a nuclear family that resided on the husband's estate, as remains true even today. The father was generally the head of the household and the main disciplinarian of his own children, and he decided whether his children's requests would be granted. The father's brothers and their wives usually lived nearby and, although they had little direct authority over his children, were regarded as "second" fathers and mothers and provided counsel for their nephews and nieces. When paternal grandparents lived with the family, as happened infrequently, the children treated them far more informally than they did their father and developed warm and affectionate relationships with them (Lingenfelter 1975, 41–46). The matrilineal group, although possessing less direct influence over the children than in other Micronesian societies, functioned as a support and final safeguard. If the young Yapese were ever disowned by their families, as still occasionally happens, they could fall back on their matriclan as a refuge. There they could be sure of being accepted without feeling the need to reciprocate, much as in Palau; the love and acceptance received from the patrilineal group, on the other hand, depended in large part on the extent to which they had proved themselves obedient offspring (Lingenfelter 1975, 50). The mother's brother (wa'ayengin) had a close and informal relationship to the child as "guardian" and "navigator," providing advice and support as well as gifts of food and money when needed (Labby 1976, 50).

At the risk of blurring the cultural distinctiveness of these island societies, I shall now attempt an overview of traditional Micronesian social organization. The picture that emerges from this brief survey is of a system that incorporates delicate balances—like the most notable artifact of these

island societies, their outrigger canoes. The matrilineal side had the dominant claim on the child everywhere except in Yap. These claims were usually externalized and represented by the maternal uncle, whose relationship with the child was important enough to warrant a special kinship term. All children were fully incorporated into the lineage, regardless of where they were actually raised, and from it received their principal social identity (although not necessarily their land). The young person's primary social unit was not coterminous with the household group, which often did not bear a distinctive local term and only later came to be designated by the loanword "family" *(faameni)*.

The counterweight to the matrilineage was the paternal kin group, which was usually more shallow generationally and less important than its opposite number. It was comparable to the outrigger on a canoe in those societies where the matrilineage could be likened to the hull. Like the outrigger, the paternal kin group served to stabilize the family by distributing the weight of authority. Only in Yap did the paternal kin group have the dominant claim on the child. The paternal kin group was represented chiefly by the child's father, although others in this kin group usually exercised some authority over the child.

The precise roles of the maternal uncle and the father, each representing his respective kin group, were complementary although they resist easy generalization. Ethnographical evidence suggests that the nature of these roles not only varied from one island culture to another, but even within a single culture at different times. It would be misleading simply to depict one as an authority figure and the other as a friend, even in those societies where the child's relationship was significantly more informal with one than with the other (Sweetser 1966, 1009). Generally, however, the father exercised the most direct authority over his child while young, while the maternal uncle assumed a larger share of the responsibility after adolescence. Yet, even in the young person's postadolescent years, authority was shared by members of both the paternal and maternal kin groups.

Within such broad outlines of a family system, child-rearing roles were distributed among a number of individuals. Some persons functioned as disciplinarians, others acted much more as advocates, and sometimes still others provided formal instruction in cultural matters. If a young man experienced what he felt was harsh treatment at the hands of one, he could usually find another to plead his cause. Or if the relationship deteriorated to the point where he was rejected altogether by his father's kin

group, as in the cases from Palau and Yap, he could always seek out his matrilineal relatives, who would normally offer him refuge with no questions asked. In addition, the young person had older relatives with whom he could establish a more informal relationship, particularly grandparents in the Marshalls and Yap. In short, the elaborate system as it functioned in an earlier age was designed to afford the young person, through the partition and distribution of supervisory control, numerous checks against any abuse of authority in the particularly difficult years following adolescence. The system also provided a host of persons who could act as intermediaries to help resolve conflicts, as well as broad protection for those who found themselves unable to resolve such conflicts.

## CHANGES IN THE MICRONESIAN FAMILY

Many critical changes have occurred in the Micronesian family over the past two or three decades. However, since there is neither the space nor the detailed information to describe these changes island by island, I shall present a brief picture of the transformation of the family in Truk, the island group that has been studied most intensively, and then offer some general, admittedly tendentious, observations on the patterns of change in the rest of Micronesia.

Many Trukese, though not nearly as many as formerly, still live on their matrilineal estates, but these now function much differently than they did in the past. Whereas formerly the lineage head assigned and supervised the work of his juniors, presided over the distribution of food prepared from the land, and exercised authority over postadolescents on a regular basis, this is no longer true. These roles have gradually been transferred to the heads of the separate households that make up the matrilineage group. As the availability of a cash income increased and household heads (generally the fathers of nuclear families) retained their money and store-bought goods, their dependence on support from lineage land decreased. Social expectations changed accordingly, even in those kin groups that did not have wage earners or a significant cash income. Consequently, the father of the family has assumed the principal responsibility for feeding his own household, even though there is still considerable sharing of food and other resources with other households on the estate. The father, too, has assumed final authority over his own children, even after adolescence, and is expected to care for their needs and discipline them when required.

With the surrender of much of the authority that lineage heads once held, the father has become the master of his household in a way that was unthinkable only thirty years ago. The lineage still functions at times as an economic unit, as when the lineage head marshalls his kin group and resources for a wedding, funeral, or other special occasion. The same may be said of the lineage as a social unit: the maternal uncle or lineage head often is consulted on the choice of a marriage partner and often acts as a spokesman for the entire kin group. But this should not disguise the fact that the household has attained a level of autonomy in daily life that constitutes a social revolution (Hezel 1987, 289).

Throughout Micronesia the intricate family system of earlier times has been greatly modified and its delicate balance upset. The role of the maternal uncle, and the matrilineage he represents, appears to have declined in importance almost everywhere. In societies where the maternal uncle could once correct or punish his sister's children, he seldom dares to do so nowadays. His authority to exact labor from his nephews and nieces has greatly declined. As if in recognition of his diminished role, fewer young people seem to be using the special referential term for maternal uncle; most are apparently content to refer to him as "father," the same term that is used for paternal uncles. This is especially noticeable in Truk and Pohnpei, but the same trend is becoming visible in Palau and the Marshalls. Many of the functions that were once performed by the maternal uncle have been taken over by the father, as we have seen in Truk. The father and mother are now recognized, everywhere but in the more traditional outlying islands, as the principal, and increasingly the exclusive, disciplinarians of their postadolescent children.

As the family becomes more nuclearized, some of the large variety of nurturing roles once distributed through the old matrilineal and paternal family groups are being lost, sometimes for different reasons. Although the grandparents still maintain an easy relationship with the young in the Marshalls, they are less frequently present in the household, especially among the many families who have immigrated to the population centers of Majuro and Ebeye in search of wage labor. The same can be said of the matrilineal aunts in Palau who always had an essential role in supporting the young in times past (Smith 1983, 85). Such changes as these, like the nuclearization of the Trukese family, are a response to changing circumstances in the community today. With the widespread migration to towns during the 1960s and 1970s, these roles fell into disuse because the individ-

uals who would have assumed them frequently did not follow the family into town. Even Yap, traditionally patrilocal and nuclear in family form, seems to have undergone a trimming of family roles. There the support that paternal uncles once provided for their nephews seems to have diminished, and the role of the maternal uncle has been circumscribed. In the other, traditionally matrilineal societies of Micronesia, the changes have moved toward a nuclearized family, shallower in depth and with differences between maternal kin and paternal kin becoming blurred.

## IMPACT OF MONETIZATION

Why such profound changes in the bedrock of Micronesian social organization over the last few decades? The structure of the family, as anthropologists remind us tirelessly, is embedded in and inextricably related to the traditional land tenure systems that govern the allocation of island resources among kin groups and their members. As Alkire put it, "Micronesian socio-political institutions—including the kinship system—are founded on the control of land" (1977, 87). This is understandable given that land, always a scarce commodity in the small islands of the area, constituted the only means of survival for traditional Micronesians. Changes in land inheritance, for whatever reason, have always been accompanied by corresponding changes in the social organization. For instance, when the German colonial government at the beginning of the century imposed a land reform on Pohnpei in which inheritance was to proceed from father to eldest son, residential patterns swung from matrilocal to patrilocal (Petersen 1977, 118–125). It is likely that an early shift toward patrilocal estates in Yap resulted in the gradual emergence of the patrilineage as the dominant kin group on that island. To use Alkire's words, land has always been both life and a way of life for Micronesians (Alkire 1977, 88)—at least until the postwar years, when an alternative resource base in the form of wage employment was introduced.

Much of island Micronesia had had a taste of money as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Pohnpei alone may have been receiving as much as $8000 yearly during the peak period of its whaleship trade, and the copra industry soon replaced the whalers there and elsewhere as the major source of income (Hezel 1984a, 13–14). As far as can be determined, this fairly substantial trade did not effect any lasting changes on the family structure because the income, largely in the form of trade goods, was dis-

tributed through the traditional chiefly networks (Hanlon 1988, 70–71). Its short-term effect was to strengthen rather than weaken existing socio-political structures. Even goods that bypassed these networks and went directly into the hands of individuals, as happened in the flourishing trade for women on Pohnpei and Kosrae, did not represent a threat to the traditional economic mechanisms. The beneficiaries could not eat the tobacco and gingham and blue serge that they received in exchange for what they were selling. Throughout those years and the period of colonial rule that followed, the land-based economy—and the traditional family—remained unchallenged by the cash flow from without. Exports—copra for the most part—peaked at the turn of the century, and by the time production increased in the 1920s the market price had fallen so much that there was no appreciable increase in per capita income.

Even at the height of the Japanese "economic miracle" in Micronesia, in 1937, the per capita income from copra amounted to only $28 in current dollars, or one-fourth of that in postwar dollars (Hezel 1984a, 30). Micronesian participation in other Japanese industries, especially the lucrative sugar industry, was minimal. Although almost four hundred Islanders were employed in the phosphate mines and another eleven hundred were employed on a part-time basis by the industrial giant Nanyo Boeki Kaisha, in addition to those working for the South Seas Government, wages were low and the economic impact of the take-home pay was negligible (Purcell 1967, 198). The combined yearly wages of all Micronesian employees, even if all had been working full-time, would have come to only 230,000 yen, or a yearly per capita income of less than $5 in current dollars (Purcell 1967, 198; Hezel 1984a, 30).

During the early postwar years Micronesians still relied almost exclusively on the fruits of their land, and the traditional family structure remained very much intact everywhere in Micronesia. Lineage groups, or other larger family units, regularly ate together and worked together, providing the labor and supervision for most of the daily tasks necessary for survival, as is known from the ethnographies produced by the CIMA (Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology) team at work in the islands at this time. How could this not be the case? The per capita income for Micronesians (outside the Northern Marianas) was only $28, most of which came from the sale of copra, fish, and a few other exports (Table 6). Micronesians recall that the copra was produced by traditional kin groups from plots inherited in more or less traditional ways and the

Table 6. Growth of Total Income from Salaries and Exports in Micronesia, Selected Years, 1950–1977

| Year | Salaries | | Exports | | Total per capita income | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total ($000) | Per capita | Total ($000) | Per capita | Unadjusted | 1950 $ |
| 1950 | 330 | 8 | 972 | 20 | 28 | 28 |
| 1954 | 1,000 | 19 | 1,213 | 22 | 41 | 36 |
| 1957 | 1,541 | 26 | 1,400 | 24 | 50 | 42 |
| 1962 | 2,355 | 33 | 2,000 | 28 | 61 | 46 |
| 1967 | 6,713 | 83 | 2,100 | 26 | 109 | 82 |
| 1972 | 21,949 | 230 | 2,373 | 25 | 255 | 88 |
| 1977 | 42,781 | 388 | 2,606 | 24 | 412 | 114 |

*Source:* Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, 1981. *Annual Report to the United Nations.*

proceeds from sales were distributed in traditional ways—that is, through the head of the estate. During the 1950s, with the increase in employment among local people, the per capita income (in 1950 dollars) rose slowly, reaching $46 by 1962—a gain of 60 percent in twelve years. Growth of per capita income was much more rapid subsequently, thanks to the liberalization of the US funding policy for the Trust Territory that began during the Kennedy administration. Over the fifteen years between 1962 and 1977, the number of full-time employees multiplied sixfold—from 3000 to 18,000—and the total payroll skyrocketed from $2.4 million to $15.8 million (in constant dollars). The real per capita income, as measured by exports and salaries, increased from $46 to $114 (again in constant dollars). Despite an annual population growth of over 3 percent and early stagnation in export production, Micronesia's real per capita income had quadrupled in less than three decades (Figure 2). For the first time ever, the cash economy presented a real alternative to the land-based subsistence economy and the age-old modes of production and social organization that the latter implied. Familial change was now both possible and expedient.
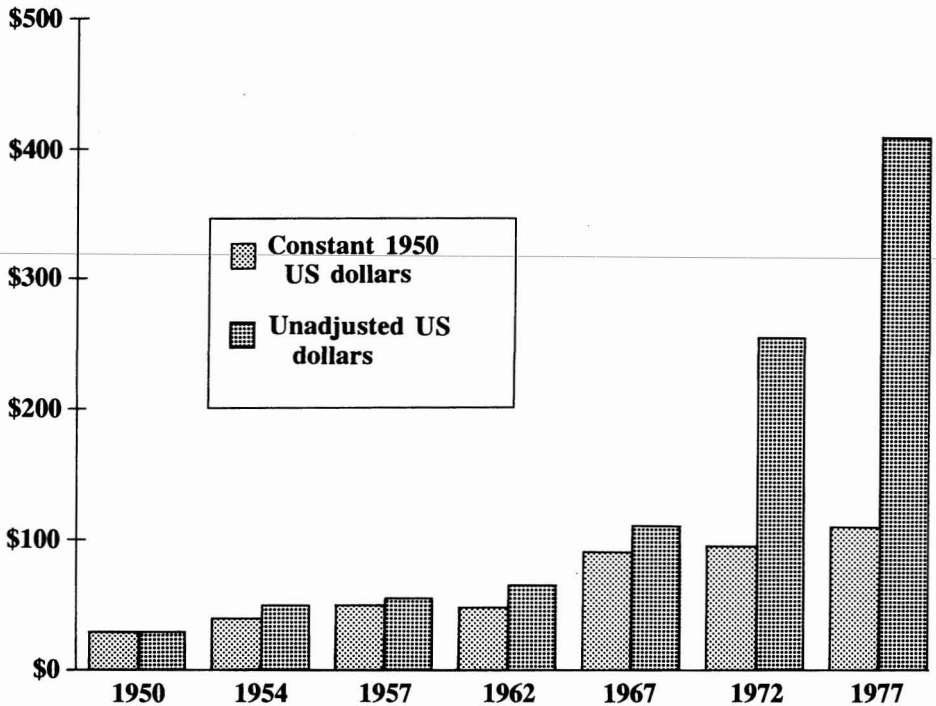
FIGURE 2. Per capita income for Micronesia, selected years, 1950–1977.

The same policy decisions that brought about the monetization of the traditional economy spawned a great number of other social changes in the Trust Territory. School enrollments multiplied; new roads and airfields improved transportation within the island societies and beyond; the addition of many more expatriate government employees and Peace Corps volunteers greatly enlarged the foreign presence in the islands; and telecommunications intensified contact with the outside world. But none of these other changes reached into the heart of the family with the same force as the expanding cash income available to Micronesians. Indeed, many such changes had already been felt in the islands during the 1930s, the heyday of Japan's development of its Mandated Territory.

## CONSEQUENCES OF RECENT FAMILY CHANGE

The nuclearization of the Micronesian family, which is attributed to the loosening of its roots in the old land system, has had a deep impact on parenting roles today. Now bereft of much of the nurturing assistance that

they would have received from matrilocal (and sometimes patrilocal) kin in former times, parents find themselves burdened with unfamiliar responsibilities. What has been written of Trukese parents probably applies to those in most other parts of Micronesia: "They are expected to discipline their children, see to their schooling, attend to their personal adjustment needs during the difficult period of adolescence, decide which of their requests to honor and which to refuse, oversee their choice of companions, and guide them in their search for a marriage partner" (Hezel 1987, 289–290). Most onerous of all is the new responsibility that they must assume over their postadolescent offspring, especially the males, for here is where the traditional matrilineage intervened most strongly to handle the troublesome years of early manhood. Parents, who were themselves raised within the broader support system, are unprepared to exercise these new and awesome responsibilities. The larger size of today's average family due to higher child survival rates only increases the pressure on the parents. In response to the heavier demands being made on him, the father in turn entrusts even greater responsibility to the eldest son.

With this unprecedented concentration of familial authority, there is greater potential for serious conflict in the family circle, especially when the family structure that once offered its disgruntled members advice and support from other quarters has been constricted. In the past a young man who was denied a request by his father usually had several alternatives. He could try to persuade his father's brother to intercede for him, especially if he were on good terms with him. Or he might run to his maternal uncle with the request denied by his father and so call on the support of his own matrilineage. Or he might just pour out his annoyance and grief to an older lineage mate whose function was partly to provide reassurance in just such times as those. If the young person who experiences tension in his family does not have the same options today, it is because so many of these roles have been abrogated by members of the extended family in deference to the authority of the master of the household.

Young persons who are adopted by their kin seem to enjoy no easier fate than those who remain with their natural parents. In a recent study of child abuse and neglect in Micronesia, mention is made of the resentment that adoptive parents, even matrilineal relatives of children, betray at having to provide for those placed under their care (Marcus 1986, 12). Demands on them that they would have assumed as a matter of course some years ago are now often seen as an imposition, and the resentment is

manifested in frequent beatings or inattention to the material needs of the child. Cases of gross child neglect in similar situations were reported from Pohnpei and Truk. Even in Yap, where the traditional family appears to remain rather strong, there was a report of a ten-year-old boy who was neglected by his grandfather, on whom he was forced to depend for support after his father died. Later, the boy moved in with his mother, who had since remarried, but his stepfather disliked him from the start and began beating him severely, causing the boy to run away from home and wander from place to place (ibid, 11). Such tales have lately become all too familiar in Truk, too, especially in the case of women who remarry and bring children by their first marriage with them to their new spouse's estate, where these children are the victims of discrimination and often are subjected to harsh scoldings or beatings by their stepfathers. In an earlier time such children would have been assured a secure home and unqualified acceptance among their matrilineal kin. Cases like these are a measure of just how much expectations have changed: today the children's home is with their parents rather than with the matrilineage that once held primary claim over them and stood ready to fulfill its obligations toward them.

## Summary

That Micronesia has been experiencing a suicide epidemic of proportions unparalleled at least in the present century is indisputable in the light of the data presented here and in previous studies. Suicide rates in each of the major cultural areas of Micronesia have risen unevenly but markedly since the early 1970s. Although suicide was undeniably a feature of these societies as far back as records and memories extend, this in itself offers no explanation of why the rates have suddenly risen well above the relatively low level of prewar years. In this article I have attempted to provide a social explanation, however hypothetical, for a phenomenon that has shaken these islands in the past two decades; although seemingly on the wane, it remains a major social problem.

Any attempt to provide an explanation for a social problem of this complexity, particularly one that cuts across cultural boundaries, always runs the risk of oversimplification. However there are grounds for taking a broad approach to the problem of suicide in Micronesia. The striking epidemiological similarities of suicide throughout Micronesia—the con-

centration of suicide among young males and the rapid increase in rates—
suggest the possibility of a common cause or set of causes. The rather tight
cultural patterning of suicides in all parts of Micronesia and the shared
cultural meaning of suicide increase this possibility. Differences in these
patterns from island to island—most notable being the frequency of love
suicides in Palau and the Marshalls—appear to be variations on a com-
mon theme or overlays on a basic transcultural pattern.

My previous analysis of the Truk suicides, which admittedly show a
simpler causal typology, revealed a seemingly strong correlation between
the onset of higher suicide rates and the breakdown of the matrilineage as
the fundamental unit of social organization in the more acculturated
islands of the Truk Lagoon (Hezel 1987). Although the precise steps in this
gradual process cannot be fixed with chronological certainty, the volume
of anthropological literature from the late 1940s documenting the strength
of the traditional system at that time leaves no doubt that the transforma-
tion has occurred within the last forty years. During that period fragmen-
tation of the matrilineal unit advanced to such an extent that today the
head of the household has assumed the major responsibility for feeding
and supervising household members, tasks that had always been the role
of the lineage chief. This change, which brings with it new and more
intense parenting responsibilities, was probably precipitated by funda-
mental economic changes that created a new resource base for Trukese—a
direct effect of widespread access to salaries as employment opportunities
multiplied during the 1960s and 1970s.

What demonstrably happened in Truk may well have occurred in other
parts of Micronesia as well. Although the baseline data on social organi-
zation in the other island groups are often less reliable than for Truk, a
comparison of the ethnographic literature with the family forms seen
today reveals significant changes that are confirmed by Micronesian
informants. Even if the data are not as tidy as for Truk, there is strong evi-
dence that discernible shifts have occurred in the patterns of basic social
organization in the area. As in Truk, there appears to be a tendency
toward nuclearization of the family, a corresponding attenuation of the
role of the matrilineage in child-rearing, and a concentration of authority
in the parents. These shifts, like those documented for Truk, can be
assumed to have their roots in the economic changes that have revolution-
ized these societies in the last three decades. Since the forms of social
organization and the management of the slender resource base in the

islands have always been intimately connected, it is difficult to imagine what else might have caused the breakdown of the most basic social unit.

Although there is no conclusive proof that these changes in the family structures of Micronesia are the main cause of the suicide epidemic, there is a considerable amount of circumstantial evidence. Because Micronesian suicides have always been and are still primarily responses to family disturbances, it stands to reason that any malfunctioning of the family could have a direct impact on the suicide rate. Moreover, the recent transformations in the Micronesian family appear to have resulted in increased intergenerational tensions and a loss to the family of just those resources that had helped it in handling such tensions. The recent structural changes in the family have left it both debilitated and more conflict-laden—more susceptible, therefore, to generating situations that lead to suicide. Undoubtedly, other factors have also contributed to the high rates of suicide in recent years, but probably less decisively than the family changes themselves.

Finally, I believe that this analysis of suicide in Micronesia, tentative though it is, may well have a broader applicability than to Micronesia alone. Western Samoa, among other places, has experienced a suicide epidemic similar to that of Micronesia, with the circumstances surrounding the suicides and the emotions displayed bearing a remarkable similarity to those in Micronesia (Figure 1). In Samoa there have been notable changes in social organization in recent years as chiefly titles proliferated, the number of households multiplied, and the average size of households dropped. Could the multiplication of titles for political reasons have had much the same effect on the Samoan family as the growing cash income has had on the Micronesian family? Is it possible that the well-publicized high suicide rates among some Native American peoples, whose suicide patterns have much in common with the Micronesian patterns described here, might be rooted in the same causes? In the light of our research findings on Micronesia, these questions would seem to deserve closer examination.

# Appendix

## Population of Micronesia, 1960–1986/87

|                  | 1960*  | 1970*  | 1980*   | 1986†    |
| ---------------- | ------ | ------ | ------- | -------- |
| Palau            | 9,320  | 11,290 | 12,116  | 13,772   |
| Federated States | 42,475 | 56,570 | 73,160  | 94,534   |
|   Yap        | 5,686  | 7,020  | 8,100   | 10,139‡  |
|   Truk       | 21,401 | 28,540 | 37,488  | 44,000   |
|   Pohnpei    | 12,627 | 17,390 | 22,081  | 28,879   |
|   Kosrae     | 2,761  | 3,620  | 5,491   | 6,448    |
| Marshall Islands | 14,907 | 22,080 | 30,873  | 39,060   |
| TOTAL            | 66,702 | 89,940 | 116,149 | —        |

*Sources:* *Trust Territory Office of Planning Statistics, 1980, *Quarterly Bulletin of Statistics,* vol. 3, no. 2. Saipan.

†Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, 1986, *Thirty-ninth Annual Report to the United Nations.* . . .

‡Office of Planning and Budget, 1987, *Report on the 1987 Yap State Census of Population.* Colonia.

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