

*Love and Suffering: Adolescent Socialization  
and Suicide in Micronesia*

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OCTOBER 6, 1990

My life is coming to an end at this time. Now today is a day of sorrow for myself, also a day of suffering for me. But it is a day of celebration for Papa. Today Papa sent me away. Thank you for loving me so little. [signed] Sima

Give my farewell to Mama. Mama, you won't have any more frustration or trouble from your boy. Much love from Sima.

Moments after penning this short and bittersweet note,<sup>1</sup> the seventeen-year-old author walked into his house and hanged himself. His act of suicide replayed a scenario that, over the past two decades, has become a culturally patterned and recurring response of Micronesian adolescents to episodes of anger and shame toward close family members. Sima's succinct and carefully written note—invoking linked themes of his suffering at the rejection by his parent, yet reaffirmation of his own familial love—speaks for a generation of Micronesian youth. Many aspects of Sima's life and the situations that foreshadowed his death fit a pattern that has become an accustomed part of Micronesian adolescence. Since the mid-1970s, suicide rates among Micronesian young men aged fifteen to twenty-four have reached extraordinary levels, perhaps unsurpassed by any recorded rates among this age-sex group in other societies in the world.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I explore the cultural constructions of epidemic suicide and Micronesian adolescent socialization as two mutually informing phe-

nomena. My aim is to provide an *account* of Sima's death, in the several senses of this meaning-laden term: a narration of Sima's story, a cultural explanation of his conduct, and an assessment of the importance of that event for appreciating an existential dilemma in the changing social world of Micronesian youth.

Writings over the past ten years, principally by Hezel and myself, have analyzed epidemiological contours of suicide in Micronesia (Rubinstein 1983; 1992a), described the cultural patterning of suicides (Hezel 1984), and examined the relationship between high suicide rates and recent social and cultural change in Micronesia (Hezel 1987; 1989; Rubinstein 1992b). With this article I seek to "thicken" the writings on Micronesian suicide through an extended description of one paradigmatic episode of suicide, and to situate this phenomenon more firmly in the context of changes in adolescent socialization and lineage organization in Micronesia.

#### SIMA'S STORY: THE CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF THE ISLAND, THE VILLAGE, THE FAMILY AND THE BOY

Sima was an unremarkable boy in most respects. He was born and grew up in one of the mountainous lagoon islands of Chuuk that is visible from Weno, the commercial, administrative, and population center of the lagoon. His island and others nearby are less than an hour's commute via motorboat to the main island, and there is a daily traffic across the lagoon of people going to Weno to work, shop, visit relatives, or for medical appointments at the state hospital. Despite the short boating distance (some intrepid men have even swum the stretch), the two islands are a world apart. Weno receives daily jet service from Honolulu or Guam, and the island is fully electrified and crisscrossed with heavily traveled, paved roads. Residents in Weno are nearly entirely dependent on a cash economy, and they have access to a fairly well equipped hospital, several high schools, an international hotel, and modern air-conditioned stores and restaurants. Sima's island, on the other hand, has a reputation as one of the more traditional of the lagoon. Rocky footpaths that wend through villages and frequently flooded swampland are the only means of travel for the approximately twenty-five hundred island residents. There are no motor vehicles or public utilities; the education system consists of three elementary schools, and western health services are nonexistent. Families

rely largely on subsistence gardening, supplemented liberally with whatever cash is available from relatives who work mainly in Weno; a few families operate small stores that offer for sale meager stocks of cigarettes, canned meat, coffee, sugar, and a very limited inventory of household items.

Both of Sima's parents are from the same island. The family lives in his mother's village, according to the usual mode of residence in Chuuk, but they frequently visit his father's relatives in a nearby village reached in a leisurely twenty-minute stroll. His mother was about forty-five at the time of Sima's suicide. She is a gentle, soft-spoken woman with many older brothers and sisters, whose matrilineage is the largest and first-ranking one in the village. About half of the younger generation of village residents are related as first or second cousins of Sima, and the ranking adults of the village are nearly all Sima's "parents." Several of his mother's close matrilineal male cousins live next door, and one of these men serves as village chief. Sima grew up in the midst of mother's "brothers" and elder matrilineal cousins who formed the social and political leadership of the village. The family are staunch churchgoers, and the two village deacons are men who have married into the clan.

Sima's father is a few years older than the mother. Unlike the mother, who is unschooled, the father finished intermediate school in the district center (as Weno was called during the Trust Territory period). He has a smattering of English and is a skilled carpenter, occasionally picking up short-term work around his home island or in town. Like Sima's mother, his father is a younger sibling and a less effective and forceful personality than his elder siblings, such as an older brother who is active in the island's church and political affairs. The father can be arbitrary and unbending, and is rather easily provoked to smack his children in the face or speak harshly to them. People say that he tends to displace his anger (*asséer soong*) on his children when annoyed at his wife. Although he is not unduly harsh or abusive by Chuuk standards, neighbors recall several incidents when his wife or children fled from a beating and sought refuge with relatives.

Sima's mother bore twelve children, a large family, but not uncommon among Chuuk women of her generation; several of her sisters have been equally productive. Sima's eldest sister had just returned home after graduating a few months earlier from the public high school, while another older sister was married and living at home. His two older brothers were

attending high school in Weno and living in the dormitory. The absence of the older brothers put Sima temporarily in the position of *mwáániichi* 'first son', a position of both privilege and responsibility.

Sima was a rather self-contained and unaffiliative boy, with little of the extroverted flashiness and verbal playfulness of his older brother Pwiin. He seemed to prefer the company of younger boys, and rarely joined the volleyball or basketball games around the village. His father described him as being unusually silent (*fanafananó*), yet a dutiful son who rarely spoke badly or misbehaved in the family. On several occasions during the weeks following Sima's death, his father told me that he would have expected Pwiin rather than Sima to hang himself, because Pwiin's restlessness and prankishness frequently caused trouble in the family. Yet despite his laconic and somewhat withdrawn manner, Sima was by no means a melancholic or isolated youth. He had a sassy tongue and was quick with insults, which often got him into trouble with other boys. Sima was not one to back down from a fight, and many of his fights seemed to have been brought on by his own indiscretion and smart remarks. I witnessed this on several occasions when Sima accompanied me on walks around the island, and got into a rock-throwing, stick-swinging brawl with a boy from another village; the fighting erupted like spontaneous combustion. Around his own village, Sima was well regarded and had a reputation as a cooperative and rather respectful boy, though still quite immature and impulsive.

Sima was a healthy and intelligent youth, although physically somewhat smaller and less developed than the average seventeen-year-old in Chuuk. He was light-skinned and plain in appearance, and did not have the fine features and dark beauty of several of his brothers and sisters. Sima had not yet begun to drink alcohol, although he had tried smoking marijuana and sniffing gasoline on several occasions. He had never been arrested or had any trouble with the municipal police, as had a few of his older pals such as Nukumach, who had been disciplined for "destruction of property" after going on an angry rampage and trashing the village volleyball net. (Nukumach hanged himself three years after Sima's death.) Nor had Sima yet begun any serious affairs with girls. He had a "sweet-heart" from another village, whom he and his handsome friend Nioch would sometimes contrive to visit, but this was evidently a matter of adolescent admiration and flirtation rather than a sexual relationship that Sima was pursuing.

Unlike Pwiin, who had been adopted by a closely related couple and frequently slept in his adoptive parents' house, Sima had always lived at home. During the year or two prior to his death, he occasionally slept in the *wuut* 'lineage meetinghouse' beside the family house, with his two older brothers and other close male cousins.

His parents described Sima as a rather temperamental and easily wounded boy. They told me that Sima had always been quick to start crying when scolded by his father; of all their children, Sima was the one most likely to cry at a scolding. On numerous occasions, he would look at his father in silence, and tears would well up in his eyes. One such occasion occurred two weeks before his death; he was heating some water, and his father scolded him for something in front of a number of other boys. Sima started to cry, and continued crying as he was tending the water.

#### SIMA'S STORY: STATIONS ALONG THE WAY

Reconstructed accounts of the significant course of events that culminate in a suicide are deeply problematic. Which were the moments that mattered in the individual's progression toward self-inflicted death? What was the personal calculus of experiences that yielded suicide as its product? My account of a few selected moments and changes in Sima's last year of life would not necessarily correspond to his own account, had he constructed one, or to accounts from his family. Micronesian accounts of suicides are notably episodic and proximate, in which all the relevant social action and individual meditation on the decision occurs during the scene immediately preceding the act of suicide. For example, the first account of Sima's suicide I received was from his nineteen-year-old cousin, a rather rigidly dutiful and moralistic girl, who told me, "Aah, he was just angry. Samichy [Sima's father] scolded him. Sima was too lazy to work. So when Samichy got after him, Sima got mad and hanged himself." I find these accounts troubling and incomplete, as would most people who hold western folk and clinical theories of suicide as the outcome of lengthy and intense reflection that accumulates through a succession of personal misfortunes or in a serious crisis. The difference in the two styles of accounting reflects distinctive cultural psychologies and assumptions about motivation. One links social action primarily to the "self," ideally an integral, autonomous actor behaving according to a stable and contin-

uous pattern; the other links social action to the situation, which bears its own internal logic and expected outcome. An exploration of the opposition of “suicidal persons” and “suicidal situations” as alternative cultural accounts is beyond the scope of this discussion, but I acknowledge here that my own reconstruction of Sima’s trajectory toward his death is fundamentally different from the form a locally constructed account would take.

About a year prior to Sima’s death, he left his home island to attend intermediate school. This was the first time he had lived away from home, but he was in the company of a number of close cousins and other relatives from his village. The school was on an island only a few miles away, and the students frequently came home for weekends. In mid-December during his first year in school, Sima was suspended. The story was that he had been hungry one evening and had gone into the girls’ dormitory looking for one of his female cousins who might have received cooked food from their family at home. His parents sided with Sima; his father told me somewhat defensively, and with a tone of disappointment, that Sima had been unfairly suspended. When I left the island just after Christmas, Sima was expecting to return to school in January when the students began their second semester. However, when I returned to the island in April I found that Sima had been recently expelled, or had dropped out while on disciplinary probation due to misbehavior.

His relatives seemed indifferent to Sima’s expulsion. Nobody had much to say about it or showed much interest in knowing exactly what had happened at school to cause the expulsion. Sima himself indicated that he wanted to continue with school, either in the Catholic intermediate school or the public intermediate school in Weno. His father advised him to take the school entrance test in the spring and wait until the following school year to reenter.

Sima appeared to be in a blue mood during his first week or so back in the village. He spent much of his time lolling around inside the *wuut*, napping and chatting. The thought occurred to me then that Sima’s setback in school might be the onset of a downward spiral that could eventuate in suicide, and I discussed this forecast with Fran Hezel at one of our fortnightly sessions when we reviewed field data. However, within a few weeks Sima had become involved in the daily course of activities and was taking an active part in gardening, preparing food, and helping with other chores. I dismissed my gloomy prediction. Sima planted his own

potato garden, a significant benchmark of self-sufficiency and the coming of age of adolescents in Chuuk. Six months later, when the first harvest from his garden—large, well-grown tubers—was served at his funeral, people did not miss the poignancy of the coincidence.

During the first week in July, a scuffle broke out among several boys playing volleyball in the village. The fight was apparently started by Sima's twelve-year-old cousin, a self-assertive and truculent child. The twelve-year-old was angry at losing, and had tossed a stone and hit fifteen-year-old Benrad in the seat of his pants. Benrad, a youth with a reputation as a hot-tempered fighter, turned on the younger boy, and Sima, two years older and larger than Benrad, immediately jumped in to fight with Benrad and protect his younger cousin. The scene suddenly turned into a violent contest between Sima and Benrad. Several others rushed in to separate the two boys, but Benrad pulled free, seized a machete lying nearby, and ran up to Sima. He whipped the machete twice at Sima's neck. Sima managed to parry what could have been fatal chops of the blade, but he sustained a deep slice through one shoulder and a cut on his wrist, both of which went to the bone. He spent two weeks recuperating in Chuuk hospital, attended by his eldest sister. She told me that he was angry and sullen throughout his convalescence. She wanted to bring in a priest to talk to Sima and soothe his anger against Benrad, but Sima told her he did not want to speak to anyone.

Sima returned to the village in mid-July with a large raw wound on his shoulder, still open and oozing, and a crudely sutured but cleaner laceration on his wrist that was already healing over. His scars were the subject of much attention and comment from other boys, and Sima did not hesitate to show off his wounds when asked. I left the island in early August, and during my last two weeks, Sima appeared outwardly untroubled and rather more responsive, solicitous, and friendly than was his wont.

During the summer months of June, July, and August, Sima's family was unusually dispersed. His older sister, who had tended him at the hospital, was working as a store clerk in town, and his two older brothers were living with cousins on other islands. Sima's fourteen-year-old brother, just below him in age, was staying with his mother's sister's family nearby. His father and one of his young sisters had moved to the father's village, to care for Sima's paternal grandmother, who was dying. Sima stayed at the family house, where only his mother, the young children, and his elder sister and her infant and invalid husband remained.

When the grandmother died in late August, the entire family assembled in the father's village. Sima and his older brother Pwiin were unhappy with the change and felt overworked and uncomfortable among their father's relatives. Their father was perhaps anxious to demonstrate his filial duty to his mother's family, especially in the eyes of his older brother, who had remained on their maternal land and had assumed a position of leadership there. He became a strict taskmaster over his boys, and a week later when Pwiin returned to high school, all the work fell on Sima. Under his father's unrelenting direction, Sima hauled coral boulders to build a seawall around his father's brother's house. During the week prior to his suicide, Sima vented his displeasure with uncharacteristic rudeness on a few occasions, by shouting insults at people along the path.

Sima's suicide occurred late one Saturday morning. Saturday in Chuuk is *ráánin ammón* 'the day of preparations', when families are busy gathering food and cooking enough for the evening, the following Sunday Sabbath, and the beginning of the work week. On Friday night, Sima's father told him to wake up early the next day and be ready to help pick breadfruit. The father arose early on Saturday, awakened Sima and Sima's pal Fasi, and told the two boys to meet him shortly at the garden and to bring a bamboo pole-knife for picking breadfruit. Sima and Fasi dawdled around the village for a few hours in an unsuccessful search for a bamboo pole they could borrow, and they finally showed up empty-handed at the garden site. The father was furious at the boys' delay and their failure to bring the pole. He scolded Sima angrily, shouting at him that the whole family would go hungry if Sima didn't help with the work and do what he was told. Waving his machete in Sima's face, the father threatened to chase the son with the knife, then irately dismissed the boy, saying "Get out of here, and go find somewhere else to live!"

The two boys retreated, and Sima told his friend to go home alone. Rather than return to his father's village, Sima trudged tearfully back to the temporarily vacated family house in his mother's village. He found his fourteen-year-old brother along the path and asked to borrow a pen. An hour or two later the younger boy remembered the pen and went looking for Sima. Nobody had seen Sima return along the path to the next village, so the younger brother guessed that Sima might have gone into the empty, locked house. When he peered inside and saw Sima standing in the middle of the dark room, immobile and in an oddly slack posture, he sensed that something was wrong. He squirmed through an opening into the house,



and then started screaming when he realized that Sima had hanged himself and was dead.

## EPIDEMIOLOGICAL TRENDS AND CULTURAL PATTERNS

Adolescent suicide in Micronesia emerged as a trend of epidemic proportion during the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Rates doubled nearly every four years, and by the late 1970s had reached truly alarming levels. After 1980 the suicide rate among Micronesian youth leveled off and briefly began to decline almost as precipitously as it had increased ten years earlier. This gave rise to some hopes that the suicide phenomenon was an unusual single-generation cohort effect associated with the first postwar generation of children passing through a high-risk adolescent period of rapid social change. However, by the mid-1980s the suicide rate had again turned upward and by the end of the decade had climbed well above the previous peak. Suicide rates during the years 1980 to 1993 have continued at the high levels reached in the late 1980s.

Micronesian suicides show distinctive features and tight cultural patterns that make the phenomenon very nearly unique in cross-cultural comparison. The most distinctive feature is the focus of suicide among young men aged 15 to 24; the median age is 21. Over half of all Micronesian suicides have occurred within this narrow age-sex group, which constitutes less than 10 percent of the total population.<sup>3</sup> During the 1980s, suicide rates among young men in some Micronesian areas, especially Chuuk and the Marshall Islands, reached the extraordinarily high rates of 200 to 250 per 100,000 annually, over ten times the rate for a comparable age-sex group in the United States (Rosenberg et al 1987).<sup>4</sup>

The disproportion of male to female suicides is also remarkable. Overall, male suicides outnumber female by a ratio of 13:1, compared with a ratio of 2:1 to 3:1 in North America and most European countries (Farberow 1985). The male-female ratio is one of the features of Micronesian suicide that shows the greatest variation from one island group to another, and is likely influenced by cultural distinctions in the status and roles of men and women as well as in cultural differences in gender relations. In Yap, where married couples typically reside virilocally and women's status and political power traditionally were weak, male suicides outnumber female by less than 5:1. At the other extreme is the Marshall

Islands, where female suicides are virtually unknown; the male–female ratio is nearly 50:1.<sup>5</sup>

Suicide in earlier times is well attested in Micronesian historical records and in remembered family events, but the narrow focus of risk among young men is clearly a recent pattern associated with the first postwar generation reaching adolescence. Although data are sketchy for suicides prior to 1960, the former epidemiological picture looks quite different from that of today.<sup>6</sup> The median age of the earlier suicides is close to 30, nearly a full ten years older than the median age of recent suicides, and the male–female ratio of the earlier cases was roughly 6:1, about half the contemporary ratio. It would be possible to construct a typology of Micronesian suicides comprising a fairly small set of representative cases. The “ideal types” show strong historical continuity—cases described in the 1840s sound quite contemporary—but the relative frequency of different types has changed dramatically. Compared with the overshadowing preponderance of young male suicides such as that of Sima, other suicide types in Micronesia appear to be relatively minor residual patterns.

The cultural patterning of Micronesian suicides is apparent in the characteristic methods and motives, the typical actors and precipitating scenes, and the usual conflicts and emotions attributed as causes. The great majority of suicides occur during the hours of darkness, very close to home, or even inside the person’s house. Hanging is overwhelmingly the method of choice, while suicides by gunshot or substance ingestion rank a very distant second and third place. In a significant number of hanging deaths, the victim’s body is not suspended above the ground, but is found in a standing, kneeling, or even seated position.<sup>7</sup> The act is performed by placing the head in a noose and leaning forward, allowing the weight of the body to draw the noose tight around the sides of the neck and prevent blood circulation to the brain. The person quickly slips into unconsciousness, and death comes from anoxia rather than suffocation.<sup>8</sup> This is a rather gentle and quietly retreatist technique of killing oneself, and we might conjecture about its psychological significance as a preferred method among Micronesian adolescents.

The suicides typically appear to be acts of impulse, with little forewarning or premeditation or planning. In only about 20 percent of the cases was there any suicidal communication, and often whatever allusion was made to suicide was so indirect or casual that the remark did not take on significance until after the fact, when friends and relatives searched for

possible signals they might have missed. During the months prior to his suicide, Sima, for example, had dropped a few hints that nobody had taken seriously. As his father explained to me, “Sometimes Sima just talked nonsense (*nannan wumwes*).” In late July, after coming home from the hospital, he was reported to have said, “The end of October will also be the end of my life.” Later, after moving to his father’s village, he once asked someone what month it was. After hearing that it was September, he said, with ambiguous intent, “Well, come October, Sima won’t be around here (*nónómw*) anymore.” Even in cases where the completed suicide was preceded by a suicide threat or attempt (13 percent of all cases), the earlier action was generally not predictive or indicative of the later act. In trying to reconstruct precursor behaviors to suicidal deaths, one must bear in mind that suicidal gestures and actions of varying lethality and seriousness are remarkably commonplace in some Micronesian communities.<sup>9</sup>

The scenarios and conflicts that precipitate adolescent suicides are culturally patterned, and fall into three well-defined types that constitute nearly the entire universe of Micronesian adolescent suicides (aside from the nearly 20 percent of cases in which no reason or relationship was provided in accounts of the death, or the few cases in which mental illness was given as the main reason). By far the predominant type is that illustrated by Sima’s suicide: a young man who hangs himself in anger, after experiencing an acute sense of rejection by his parents. Typically the suicide is triggered by a scolding from a parent or an elder sibling. The young person feels unfairly berated and is acutely troubled by the perceived loss of his parents’ love. In many instances, a parent’s simple refusal of an adolescent’s request, often for something as minor as a few dollars or a bit of food, provokes a suicidal response. One young man recounted to me his suicide attempt after his father refused to give him five dollars. As he expressed it, the five dollars his father withheld was a measure of how little his father loved him. The youth ran from the house and hanged himself nearby, but the rope broke as soon as he put his weight into it.

We can call this type “anger” suicides, but the term “anger” requires considerable exposition in order to capture the complexity of meaning embedded in the equivalent Micronesian terms. Micronesian languages—at least the two in which I have worked—distinguish between “generic” anger, which is outwardly directed and potentially damaging to other

people, and the particular sort of inward-turned, plaintive, and retreatist anger that may lead to suicide. In the Chuuk language, one speaks precisely about suicidal anger by using the term *amwuunumwuun*.<sup>10</sup> The term connotes both the emotional underpinnings attributed to suicide and some dimensions of the social situations in which suicidal acts are played out. It also connotes hurt feelings and sullen withdrawal in the face of disapproval or repudiation by close, senior family members. Children may be *amwuunumwuun* toward their parents and older siblings, but the term would not apply to the reverse situation, the anger that parents experience toward children's misbehavior. Persons who are *amwuunumwuun* are liable to refuse to talk to others, to isolate themselves and avoid contact with others, perhaps to refuse to eat, and as an ultimate expression of their emotional state, to kill themselves.

The local understanding in Chuuk of the motivational intent behind *amwuunumwuun* suicides expressly denies the element of revenge often attributed to suicides by western psychoanalytic writers.<sup>11</sup> The adolescent's act of self-injury or self-destructive *amwuunumwuun* is intended to appeal to the other person to restore the ruptured relationship, rather than to inflict pain and reprisal on the other. By the act of separation and withdrawal, the aggrieved individual provokes a sense of shame and regret in the other. This strategy of emotional manipulation is learned by children at a young age.<sup>12</sup> Ideally, the scenario is played out in such a way that the incident ends happily: an older sibling or some other close relative acts as intermediary, chases after the fleeing adolescent, and with "soft talk" and kindness brings the escaping youth back to the household. Peace is made with the parents.<sup>13</sup> In actuality however, and increasingly during the past generation, this culturally patterned act of withdrawal takes extreme form and allows little chance for intervention before the action is fatal.

The second ideal type of adolescent suicide is sparked by an acute feeling of shame or fear over some personal transgression that has come to light. "Anger" suicides account for somewhat over 50 percent of all the cases, while "shame" suicides account for about 10 percent.<sup>14</sup> Often this involves a young man who has been carrying on an illicit sexual affair with a female who is too closely related to him; the youth's suicide frequently follows almost immediately on the discovery of the affair by the person's family. Another sort of shame suicide is occasioned when a youngster has injured someone, usually a close relative, as in the case of a

twelve-year-old boy who quarreled with his seventeen-year-old uncle. The two were climbing a path to the hillside gardens, and the younger one had asked his uncle to carry his pet fighting cock. The uncle grabbed the rooster, cruelly twisted its head and broke the neck, then tossed the maimed bird into the bushes. This set off a fight between the two boys, and they continued fighting along the path until they had returned to the village. The younger boy's mother separated the two, and warned them not to fight. However, the twelve-year-old ran a short way down the path, circled around and came back, armed with a heavy stone. He hurled the rock, which struck his uncle in the head and caused profuse bleeding. As the older one was led away to have his head bandaged, people told the young boy that his uncle was dying, and the police would be coming for him. In panic, the boy fled to a nearby breadfruit tree and hanged himself with his T-shirt.

In cases of "anger" suicides, the individual feels wronged, and blame is placed on the other person. In "shame" suicides, on the other hand, this placement of blame is inverted. However, both of these types of suicide share a critical feature: the locus of conflict is very narrowly drawn among close senior family members. It is virtually unknown for a Micronesian adolescent to commit suicide after being scolded by a teacher, a neighbor, a priest, a policeman, a friend, or a collateral relative. If a young man seeks to marry a young woman of his choosing, but is thwarted by his sweetheart's parents, suicide is quite improbable. However, if his own parents reject his plea for approval of the match, his suicide would be an accustomed response. Both anger and shame types of suicide involve, nearly universally, a perceived rupture between the individual and his close family.

The third ideal type may be labeled "jealousy" suicides, and is triggered by a reaction of sexual jealousy directed toward a spouse or lover. For example, a high school student discovered that his girlfriend was consorting with other boys and hanged himself. Or a young sailor whose girlfriend was also traveling aboard ship went to his cabin, found the door locked, and moments later saw another crewman slipping out after a tryst with the girlfriend; the jealous sailor immediately went to the stern of the ship and leaped overboard. Scenarios of this sort account for about 5 percent to 10 percent of the suicide cases. In local accounts of this type of suicide, the emotions that are variously attributed to the actor include anger at the errant lover, shame over the public knowledge that a girl-

friend or wife is unfaithful, and sexual jealousy toward the philanderer. Despite the attributions of anger and shame, this type of suicide is very different from the first two types, which both involve authority conflicts among close family members. In general, "anger" and "shame" suicides are expressions of conflict between generations; "jealousy" suicides are expressions of conflict between the sexes.<sup>15</sup>

Cultural patterning of adolescent suicides in Micronesia is evident in the usual methods and staging of the act, the motives and typical scenarios that precede it, and the age and sex of the actors. Suicidal individuals exhibit several other significant characteristics. Firstborn sons, or boys who are *de facto* the eldest son living at home (such as Sima, whose two elder brothers were residing elsewhere), appear to be at greater risk than others. Although there is a wide range of dispositions among the suicide victims, generally they appear to be rather quiet and dutiful boys, not the village rebels and delinquents. The typical suicide acts are expressions—in exaggerated form—of traditional Micronesian values. While alcohol plays a prominent role in the lives and final hours of many young suicide victims, it is unusual to find a history of severely disrupted or antisocial behavior.<sup>16</sup> The great majority of these youth are normal, healthy, and socially well-adjusted individuals. Symptoms of mental illness are found in only about 6 percent of the cases.<sup>17</sup>

Considering the enormous impact that American-style schools and new job opportunities have had on the social world of Micronesian adolescents during the past two decades, it is important to examine the educational and occupational characteristics of the suicide victims. In general, the suicides appear to be fairly average, or perhaps slightly below par, in their educational and occupational success. Aside from the cases for which educational data are missing (27 percent), 60 percent of the suicides had not completed junior high school, and 40 percent had completed junior high school or higher. About 20 percent had completed high school, and less than 2 percent had completed college. This distribution is comparable to the Micronesian population at large.<sup>18</sup> The employment picture looks similar. Excluding the suicides who were in school (20 percent) and the cases for whom data on employment were missing (15 percent), 35 percent of the remaining cases were employed full-time, with blue-collar trades and unskilled workers outnumbering office workers by two to one; slightly over half (54 percent) were unsalaried, and 11 percent held part-time unskilled work.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, school and work-related

problems never appear in local explanations for suicides among young Micronesians. In only 10 cases out of 806 was personal failure or financial trouble a primary contributing factor to the suicide.

The geographic distribution of adolescent suicides across Micronesia reinforces the conclusion that suicide is not directly associated with modernization, as measured by an individual's educational attainment, employment, and residence. The highest rates of suicide appear in the peri-urban areas, those islands and villages within commuting distance of the population centers. These communities provide some of the labor for the urban center jobs, but they lack the "bright lights" and other amenities of town life. Although subsistence gardening and fishing provide a significant portion of families' resources, the economy of these peri-urban areas is increasingly dependent on salaried work and store-bought goods. Rates of suicide among youth are lower in the urban town centers than in the peri-urban communities, and lowest in the outer islands, where people are still largely self-sufficient through subsistence fishing and gardening.

In sum, youth suicide in Micronesia is a phenomenon that has emerged over the past two decades, but the high degree of cultural patterning in the typical actors, themes, and scenarios of suicide displays marked continuity with earlier times and with recognized Micronesian value orientations and social relationships. Peculiarities in the statistical patterns of suicides from one Micronesian culture to another appear to reflect underlying differences in cultural configurations such as male-female status and household residence. Although the epidemic rise in youth suicide rates parallels rapid social changes in Micronesia, the association between suicide and modernization is problematic; contemporary youth suicides appear most common among transitional communities and individuals, rather than among those most exposed to modern lifestyles.

I now turn to a consideration of the cultural construction of adolescence in Micronesia, in order to understand how changes in the social world of youth may have set the stage for suicide.

## SOCIALIZATION AND THE CHANGING CONSTRUCTION OF ADOLESCENCE

Socialization may be conceptualized as a culturally constructed set of goals, practices, and stages. Each society broadly defines the desirable behaviors and attitudes to which its members should ideally conform.

Socialization involves moving individuals through a recognized schedule of developmental and social stages, by means of practices that communicate and foster the desired personal attributes and mark the transition from one stage to another. These practices include formal ceremonies for children and formal instruction and institutions for learning, as well as the continuous informal interactions of children with their parents and caretakers, that are culturally aimed at producing "proper" behavior and attitudes.

Because Micronesian societies are diverse in their cultural emphases, it is risky to generalize about adolescence and socialization on an area-wide basis. Some Micronesian societies, such as Palau, cultivate a good deal of status competition, mobility, and political volatility, and Palauans are known for their striving and progressive outlook on new opportunity; other societies, such as Yap, are much more firmly hierarchic and politically stable and historically have been more traditionalistic and resistant to change. Interisland and clan warfare figured prominently in some Micronesian societies, such as Chuuk, and personal qualities of bravery in the face of risk or pain still receive cultural validation; other societies, such as the Yap Outer Islands, have virtually no tradition of fighting, and the local ethos promotes highly congenial, compliant, and nonaggressive behavior.

Within this areal diversity, however, there appears to be a broad structural commonality in the process of socialization and the stage of adolescence that may underlie the rising suicide rates of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>20</sup> A dominant theme in Micronesian socialization is the importance of developing and maintaining a wide circle of social ties. "It is good to have kinsfolk" is a message that is reiterated to children through a multiplicity of contexts and practices, such as customary child adoption and fosterage by other relatives, frequent residential shifting of children from household to household, and the continuous sharing of childcare responsibilities by older siblings, grandparents, and other relatives. Socialization aims at producing children who are affiliative, acutely sensitive to social contexts and other social actors, and group oriented.

The process of socialization is centrifugal, moving the child through successive stages of expanding affiliation and identification with wider circles of kin. At each stage along this path, previous attachments are culturally downplayed and disrupted in order to redirect the individual toward additional associations. The primary bond between mother and



infant is the beginning point in this process. In Micronesia, as in many other Pacific societies, the stage of infancy—from birth to weaning—is highly indulgent and often prolonged. Infants enjoy nearly continuous physical contact with their caretakers, who are carefully attentive to the infant's needs and demands. Yet even during this early stage, the infant's attachments and attention are being oriented beyond the mother-infant dyad. Babies are constantly passed from one caretaker to another, are fed by older children and other relatives, and may even be suckled by women other than their mother.

A structural tension is generated in the attachments at each stage, and is culturally resolved by incorporating the child into wider associations at the next stage. Late in the stage of infancy, tension develops in the child's relationship with its mother, who becomes increasingly impatient with the child's demands, and inattentive to its needs. Indulgent infancy often ends abruptly late in the toddler's second year, when children find themselves displaced from the close affectionate attention of their mothers. Often the mother is again pregnant with another child, but even if not, she is much less inclined to give the child the continuous care it received earlier. In some situations, the relationship of the child to its father is culturally encouraged at this point; fathers take a more supportive role toward the young child, compensating for the inconsistency and rejection they experience from the mother (Gladwin and Sarason 1953, 234). At this juncture too, many other relatives become active as the child's primary and supplementary caretakers.

Adoptive parents especially play a role at this time, visiting the child more and more frequently, taking it from its parents for longer visits, and gradually effecting a smooth social weaning of the child from its biological household to the adoptive household (Rubinstein 1979, 228). Micronesian kinship systems have considerable latitude for computing relatedness bilaterally, and complementary relatives outside the child's lineage are often important figures in its socialization. The strain between mother and child during late infancy both facilitates and is ameliorated by wider associations forged with the father, with adopting parents, and with the wider circle of bilateral kin, early in the next stage of childhood. The goal of socialization at this point is not to push the child toward independence, but to encourage the child to depend on a widening circle of kin.

The second stage, childhood, begins around the time of weaning and continues until puberty. During this stage, children become increasingly

involved in domestic work routines and begin acquiring some of the rudimentary skills of subsistence gardening and fishing. Learning is informal; children follow their parents around and imitate their activities, while parents continually mold children's interest and attention toward culturally important activities. The third stage, adolescence, begins at puberty and continues until marriage. Generally in Micronesia, there is very little public marking or celebration of individuals' life-cycle transitions, other than at death. The onset of adolescence is the only developmental stage that traditionally was publicized; boys and girls signaled their new status at puberty by a change in their style of loincloth or skirt.

Late in the stage of childhood, another structural tension begins to develop as the child approaches sexual maturity. This tension is within the domestic unit and takes expression as a relationship of mutual avoidance and reserve that develops between brothers and sisters. In a way analogous to how the tension in the mother-child dyad is resolved by moving the child into a wider circle of parental figures, the tension in the domestic unit is resolved by incorporating the adolescent boy into a broader network of lineage and clan-mates. At adolescence, the developmental paths of boys and girls diverge sharply. Micronesian societies are mainly matrilineal and uxorilocal; women remain on their natal land, while men marry and settle on their wives' land. The man's displacement from his own domestic household does not occur at marriage, however, but much earlier, at puberty, when the tension generated by brother-sister avoidance requires that he move out of his household.

For young men in Micronesia, sexual maturity ushers them into a period of domestic insecurity and instability, for the roughly ten years between the onset of puberty in their mid-teens and their eventual marriage and incorporation into their wife's household in their mid-twenties. In the past, the culturally constructed compensation for the loss of domestic security by young men was to absorb them into the wider circle of authority and the affairs of the lineage. The lineage was responsible for maintaining large material property such as meetinghouses, canoes, and fish traps. Most of the ceremonial aspects of the subsistence economy were also organized at the lineage level—the great competitive feasts and reciprocal exchanges of food between the men and women of the village, and the periodic feasts marking traditional harvest festivals or commemorating special village events.<sup>21</sup>

Young unmarried men were a valuable labor force for the lineage, and

adolescent boys were able to establish their maturity and industriousness through their mastery of agricultural and fishing skills. Lineage subsistence activities granted young men a productive role in the village and opportunities to publicly demonstrate their competence. The lineage also provided young men with the guidance of a circle of senior men, a much more diffuse and redundant context of authority than the domestic household. Consequently, the parental role as disciplinarian lessened as boys had much less contact with their parents and as other lineage men assumed increasing responsibility for their welfare. Furthermore, for the first time in their lives, young men were not dependent on their parents for food. By taking the initiative to begin planting their gardens and fishing, young men could be assured of food and could prove their merit as providers.

In most of Micronesia, especially the central Caroline Islands and Palau, the focus of lineage activities was the men's house. This institution had special significance for young unmarried men. Foremost, it gave them a place outside the domestic household. It was both their dormitory and their recreation center. The meetinghouses and clubhouses were the center of much male activity, not only the leisurely swapping of stories and lore, but the preparation of fishing materials, the planning of work activities, and the practicing of village dances and chants. In areas of Micronesia that lacked lineage meetinghouses, such as the Marshall Islands, adolescent boys were nonetheless enjoined to move out of their domestic household. They tended to cluster in small bachelor houses or to move in with relatives who had no sexually mature daughters.

The authority held by the lineage leaders had a stabilizing effect on domestic household disruptions and discord. It was in the lineage's best interests that its members maintain their marriages harmoniously, that children be provided for when death or disability struck the parents, and that members be given refuge when they fled and hid from abusive parents or spouses. The lineage house, as a physical embodiment and practical locus of the lineage authority, undoubtedly contributed to the moral force of the lineage leaders, and the integrity of the community.

During the past several generations, social changes in Micronesia have crucially undermined the process of adolescent socialization and have set the stage for high rates of suicide among young men. Prior to the American era in Micronesia, the disruptions caused by the Japanese occupation and the war years considerably eroded the political authority and eco-

conomic functions of the lineage. Although domestic household life in most of Micronesia persisted in more or less unchanged form, by the end of World War II the lineage men's house and clubhouse institutions nearly everywhere had disappeared. The ramifications of this loss for young men were noted early in the American period. Gladwin conjectured that the breakdown in the institution of the men's house in Chuuk increased the anxiety young men experience when pressured to leave home at puberty and resulted in lowering the age of marriage, because youth cannot regain domestic lodging and security until they marry (Gladwin and Sarason 1953, 118). The boys born after the war were the first generation to enter adolescence during a time when the lineage institution could no longer compensate for the loss of close domestic household attachments.

Significantly, the years from age fifteen to twenty-four, which today constitute the high-risk period for suicide, correspond to the stage from puberty to marriage that was recognized in earlier times as a stage of insecurity and instability for young men. The process of "centrifugal" socialization in Micronesia very likely continues to operate basically as before, because it is generated through an informal and highly redundant style of parent-child interaction that is very slow to change. Today, however, young men at puberty are metaphorically flung into a social abyss, rather than into the supporting arms of the lineage and the men's house. The compensatory social mechanisms no longer operate as before, and it is much less easy for young men to venture out and "find somewhere else to live" than in the past.

Since the 1960s the rapid shift from a household subsistence economy to a cash economy has further weakened the integration and importance of the lineage. Cash economy has led to a much greater emphasis on nuclear family organization in Micronesia and, consequently, the narrowing of available kin supports outside the nuclear family.<sup>22</sup> The expansion of the cash economy has also supplanted much of the subsistence economy and reduced the opportunities for young men to find productive rewards in gardening and fishing. Young men are now held in a position of greater dependency vis-à-vis their parents. The parents' response, especially that of the father toward his older sons, is one of growing impatience and severity—yielding the many small incidents of rejection that commonly occasion a son's suicide.

The act of suicide itself, and the complex web of interpretations and attitudes associated with it, are themselves part of the changing construc-

tion of adolescence during the past few decades in Micronesia. Suicide dramatizes a number of cultural values and adolescent subcultural motifs. The act expresses in exaggerated fashion an acquiescence to parents, an avoidance of confrontation with family authority, and the overriding emotional importance of close kin relations. More than a touch of masochism and self-pity appear in many of the adolescent suicides, resonating with a cultural motif among some Micronesian youth: to extol personal suffering and to give public expression to the hardships and difficulties of one's life. In Chuuk, *riyáfféw* 'suffering' and *weyiris* 'difficulty' are the most common terms of self-description in young men's songs and in their ubiquitous graffiti. In this context, suicide may acquire rather romanticized meanings.

Sheer numerical weight and the commonness of suicidal behavior among Micronesian youth give the act a quality of inevitability and perhaps acceptance in the minds of many. The strong bonds of identification and affection among friends and brothers make the act all the more compelling. Widespread beliefs in Micronesia hold that the spirits of past suicides will beckon irresistibly to close friends and relatives. Clusters of suicides and suicide attempts have occurred in a number of communities, as well as suicide pacts among friends and shared suicidal ideas and plans.

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#### SIMA'S STORY: SUICIDE'S SEQUEL

Sima's suicide had occurred nearly three weeks prior to my return to the island after an absence of two months, but it was still quite fresh in everyone's mind. The community had just suffered another trauma, when an eleven-year-old boy in the next village hanged himself. The small boy's suicide had suddenly reopened the subject of Sima's hanging and given it added significance as the possible model for a subsequent death. When I arrived in mid-afternoon, the funeral of the young boy was still in progress, and people were somber and palpably alarmed. Under the shock of the second suicide, and in the process of recounting the story to me and bringing me into the circle of shared knowledge, people seemed to be reexperiencing some of the original intensity of the event.

In the first flush of stories I heard, the blame for Sima's suicide was laid on his father, Samichy. This explicit imputation of blame seemed unusual; generally people's accounts of suicide in Micronesia credit the actor as an autonomous agent and avoid judgments about the culpability of others.

However, as a close associate of the family I was in a somewhat privileged position to hear candid accounts; moreover, it was known that I had a professional interest in comprehending this problem, so perhaps the accounts I received were more searching than usual.

The boat operator who brought me to the island was a close affinal relative of Sima's family, and his remarks seemed to reflect community sentiment. Normally jocular, he was uncharacteristically pensive and quiet as he poled the boat over the reef. "When you see Samichy," he told me, "give him a big punch in the face; it's his fault Sima hanged himself." He said this without smiling, although partly in jest, and illustrated the remark by clenching his large fist and winding up theatrically to throw a punch. Later in the afternoon I met Samichy along the path. He came up to me with an expression of quivering uncertainty on his face. After an awkward moment or two while we both stared past each other, I told him I had heard the news of Sima when I arrived in Weno the week before. The first thing he said, softly and with a breaking voice, was that he hadn't really scolded Sima very strongly, and he hadn't hit him. By the next day, when people learned that the photographs I'd brought with me included several of Sima, there was a continual procession of people who wanted to look at them, and a repeated chorus of stylized lamentations—"Oh, oh, Sima"—as people gazed at the picture. His mother asked me for a copy of one of the photographs, the one showing Sima seated with several cousins who had all accompanied me on an inland hike several months earlier. Later in the afternoon I passed her, red-eyed and still weepy, sweeping the path in front of her house. She looked up sadly and said, "Thank you very much for the photograph. Now I've seen Sima once more."

The response among the boys of Sima's age was much more ambivalent and difficult to characterize than the self-defensiveness and anguish of his parents. A mixture of general disapproval, shocked surprise, and some disgust at the details of the death, blended with a touch of fascination and envy at how Sima, in one easy act, had shattered the calm of the village, mustered a three-day assemblage of relatives and neighbors from throughout the island and from nearby islands in Chuuk lagoon, paralyzed his parents with grief, and caused the entire community to go into mourning. Sima's best friend, fourteen-year-old Romi, told me in a quiet tone of horror how Sima looked when he was found, slumped into the noose, his knees nearly touching the ground. The constriction of the rope

had caused his tongue to protrude far out of his mouth, his face was purpled, and his eyes were staring open. (Romi said, “When the eyes are open like that, it means that someone else is going to hang himself later on.”) The still-unhealed sutures on Sima’s shoulder wound of two months earlier had burst, and blood was dripping from the gash. Romi added in a whisper, with a look of revulsion on his face, that Sima had defecated in the act of suicide. For the fourteen-year-old, the horrific image of his friend’s body was a terrifying and deeply disturbing sight.

Romi’s appraisal of Sima’s suicide, which he repeated to me several times, was phrased as a question—“It was a useless (*namwotongngaw*) thing to do, wasn’t it?” Then he reflected for a moment and added, “But so many people here are doing it!” He counted to himself and quickly came up with nine or ten suicides that had occurred in recent years on the island, and he added that four people in his own family had tried to kill themselves—his two older sisters by overdoses of medicine, his mother by hanging (she was cut down and resuscitated barely in time), and his older brother, also by overdosing on medicine.

A customary three-day wake was held for Sima before the body was buried on Sunday, beside the path near the family house. The affair was attended widely by people from the two adjacent villages, including nearly all the students attending the village elementary school. Among the students at the burial was Karson, the eleven-year-old who hanged himself a few weeks later.

The repercussions of Sima’s suicide haunted the village for some time afterward. One day the following month, after a long day in another village, attending her niece who had just miscarried in the second month of pregnancy, Sima’s mother returned home in the evening. Sima’s father, Samichy, had not been feeling well that day and was annoyed at the absence of his wife, whom he had asked to prepare local medicine for his cough and head cold. When his wife reentered the house, he boxed her in the eye, and the two got into a shouting match. The eldest daughter was at home, and she immediately sided with her mother. Furious with her father for punching her mother, she screamed at him that if he continued to make trouble in the family, she would kill herself. She then raced out of the house and disappeared down the dark path, wailing to the village at large that she intended to hang herself. Four of her close female cousins rushed off after her and eventually were able to console her and lead her back, still crying, to the house. In the meantime, the mother had been

reviling the father for his abusive behavior, and blaming him for the suicide of their son. She warned him that his bullying would lead to another suicide in the family. For several days afterward, mother and daughter kept their distance from the father. Only after the village pastor and deacon interceded to make peace a week later did the mother end her *amwuunumwuun* and return to her husband.

The most tragic aftermath of Sima's suicide was the death of eleven-year-old Karson two and a half weeks later, in the adjacent village. Like many parents in the community, Karson's mother, an energetic woman in her mid-thirties, had been apprehensive following Sima's suicide. She had called together her three older sons—aged fifteen, thirteen, and eleven—to admonish them that suicide is a terrible thing, and that they should put the thought out of their mind. Karson had answered her flippantly that if she made him angry or if she didn't give him something he wanted, he could hang himself just as Sima had done. She dismissed his remark as childish impertinence, and said curtly, "Don't talk nonsense!" As she told me later, Karson was "full of mischief" (*aa mmén mesepaat*) and she gave little credence to his warning.

Two weeks later Karson stayed home from school one morning, complaining that he wasn't in the mood. He followed his mother to the nearby garden while she gathered leaves for making soup. After they returned to the house in late morning, his mother put a bit of leftover rice on a plate for her smallest child, while she went outside to cook the soup for Karson and the others. Karson was already hungry, so he grabbed a handful of food from the child's plate. The younger child immediately went into a tantrum of protesting screams. At this point the mother rushed back inside, turned on Karson, smacked him in the face, and ordered him out of the house. Karson ducked outside, and then shouted back at his mother, in a challenging tone, "So what! I'm leaving!" (*Nge meyit! U aa nóó!*) His mother shouted back words that echoed those of Samichy: "Get out of here, and go find somewhere else to live!" (*Súúnóó, kútta iya ke pwe nómw iya!*)

Karson went off in tears, and spent much of the afternoon crying and staying by himself. At dusk his mother's brother found him sitting alone beside a culvert that crossed the main path through the village. Karson was still crying, and was playing in the water with a small toy boat attached to a plastic banding strap from a carton. His uncle asked Karson why he was crying, and Karson explained that his mother had scolded



him and slapped him. "It's nighttime, go home and eat," his uncle told him. Karson got up and walked back toward his house, still towing the toy boat behind him. Rather than going into the house, however, he came to an apple tree just beyond it and hanged himself from a low branch, using the plastic band he had been dragging along. He was still alive when discovered a few minutes later, feet touching the ground and body arched backward. But attempts to resuscitate him failed, and he died within the hour.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

During the past twenty-five years, suicide has become the primary cause of death among young Micronesian men, whose suicide rates have reached extraordinary levels by cross-cultural comparison. Equally extraordinary is the very patterned appearance of these acts of self-destruction. In this article I have sought to contribute to further understanding of this phenomenon by providing an extended account of one episode involving the suicidal deaths of two Chuuk youths. My aim has been to situate this episode within a general description of male socialization and thereby link the contemporary suicide phenomenon in Micronesia to recent social structural changes in the stage of adolescence. The episode described here also reveals the ways that one act of suicide reverberates among other susceptible family members and suggestible youths in the community and may constitute a powerful model that shapes, at least temporarily, local cultural meanings of suicide.

Outside Micronesia, the recent emergence of youth suicide as a significant social problem has occurred in societies as varied in size and lifestyle as Western Samoa (Macpherson and Macpherson 1987), Japan (Iga and Ohara 1967), Aboriginal communities of north Australia (Robinson 1990), American Indians of New Mexico (May 1987), and young white men in the United States (Rosenberg et al 1987). Can conclusions drawn from the Micronesian suicides yield useful insights into epidemic-like increases in adolescent suicide elsewhere?

As a methodology for research on adolescent suicide, the work in Micronesia demonstrates the utility of a longitudinal epidemiological approach coupled with extensive ethnographic inquiry. In general, studies of adolescent suicide, especially among larger populations, have based their interpretations on compilations of data such as death certificates,

newspaper accounts, state registries, and insurance company records (Rosenberg et al 1987, 419; see also Van Winkle and May 1986). While those data may illustrate epidemiological trends that correlate with social and cultural changes affecting adolescent life, the linkages to other phenomena remain tenuous unless grounded in descriptions of actual suicides. On the other hand, descriptive reports of adolescent suicides that give close attention to psychological and social aspects of individuals generally lack an adequate epidemiological scope for placing these cases in larger historical and changing cultural contexts.

The extensive case descriptions of suicides in Micronesia—spanning more than three decades—provide a compelling picture of how rapid changes in lineage structure and economics have affected adolescent socialization and the relations between Micronesian youths and their parents. A similar process may underlie the rising number of suicides in communities undergoing comparable sociocultural change, such as Australian Aboriginal or American Indian groups. The increase in suicide among young Tiwi men has been attributed to “the abandonment and collapse of the institutions affecting adolescence” (Robinson 1990, 175; cf Reser 1990). High suicide rates on some Apache and Pueblo Indian reservations are associated with “dissolution of the traditional family structure” and “a diminution of the father’s authority” (Resnick and Dizmang 1971, 883–885).

Such comparisons, however, require careful substantiation lest they risk typifying quite different suicide phenomena among unique cultural groups (Shore 1975; Van Winkle and May 1986, 297). Writers on culture and suicide remain notably cautious in reasoning about suicide across cultures (eg, Kiev 1979; Tousignant and Mishara 1981). Reser, for example, wrote in the concluding lines of a recent article on Australian Aboriginal suicide, that “in the last 2000 years we have made rather limited progress in understanding why individuals might take their own life in our own culture. This suggests a need for both caution and perspective in explaining suicide in an indigenous cultural context” (1990, 183). As Micronesian adolescent suicides persist at unabated and extraordinarily high rates, those seeking useful understandings of the phenomenon continue to be both challenged and humbled.

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FIELDWORK on suicide in Micronesia was supported by a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) postdoctoral fellowship to Rubinstein as part of a training grant to the University of Hawai'i Department of Anthropology, by a NIMH research grant to Rubinstein and Geoffrey M White, and by the East-West Center. Dissertation fieldwork on socialization in Fais Island was supported by grants from NIMH, the National Science Foundation, and from Stanford University. I gratefully acknowledge the institutional sponsorship of this research. This long-term study could not have been possible without the cooperation, throughout Micronesia, of innumerable people who generously shared their thoughts and recounted cases of suicide, often with evident personal distress. I am especially indebted to Father Francis X Hezel, SJ, Director of the Micronesian Seminar, for his collegial counsel and intellectual stimulation over the years; and to the Micronesian Catholic Church and to all the public health services for much logistical assistance throughout the islands.

## Notes

1 *Faansowun aa mwúúchunó manawey. Iyey eey ráán, eew ráánin ónóniinen ngeni inisiy pwan eew ráánin ekkeriyáffew ngeniyey. Ngé ráánin apwaapwa ngeni Papa. Iyey ráán Papa aa tiiniyenó. Kinissow reen owumw ttongommang ngeniyey.* [signed] *Sima*

*Ááy kkópwong epwe ngeni Mama. Mama esapw wor owumw kepwe ppet ne wosukosuk reen nowumw we áát. Ttong chaapwúúr seni Sima.*

The suicide note, along with the rope used by the boy, were burned a day or two later by the boy's uncle (mother's sister's husband). I never saw the note, but the contents were recited to me by the boy's father. The boy's name and all other names have been changed in this paper, and other biographical details have been altered to lend additional anonymity to the families and individuals.

2 In this article, Micronesia refers to the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

3 Suicide statistics in this article are based on 806 cases that have occurred during the period 1960 to 1993 by Micronesians (as defined earlier) living both at home and abroad. Interview data have been collected from a wide network of individuals throughout Micronesia on a fairly continuous basis since 1975 primarily by Francis X Hezel (first published in Hezel 1976), with assistance from Rubinstein since 1979. All available death certificates from Palau, Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, and the Marshall Islands have been added to the database.

4 Within the general trends of suicide in Micronesia, there are significant differences in statistical characteristics and cultural patterns of suicide within different ethnic groups and island areas. This article necessarily glosses over many of these intergroup distinctions.

5 Among Yapese, 54 out of 67 suicide cases were men. (This figure excludes 14 suicide cases among Yap Outer Islanders.) Among Marshallese, there have been only 4 female suicides out of 197 cases.

6 These statistics are based on the total of 73 cases that are known to have occurred prior to 1960. The time distribution of these cases is: pre-1900, 7; 1900-1909, 3; 1910-1919, 4; 1920-1929, 6; 1930-1939, 16; 1940-1949, 19; 1950-1959, 18.

7 Death by hanging occurred in 700 cases (87 percent) of the total of 806. This unusual method of suicide by nonsuspended hanging is reported for 77 of the cases, representing 9.5 percent of the total. The actual number is quite likely higher, because in many cases of suicide by hanging, information is missing on the position in which the victim's body was found.

8 In the late 1970s this method of suicide became so familiar in the Marshall Islands that some children took up a game in which one child would sit in a chair and another child would kneel in front of him. The seated child would then tighten his knees around the neck of the other one, until his kneeling companion fainted and fell forward. The game was known as "sleeping."

9 In one community where I made rather cursory inquiries about past suicidal acts, I counted 85 individuals who had attempted once or more, among a population of slightly over 1000 adults. A Chuuk Catholic priest who lived for several years on that island estimated that an exhaustive inquiry would show that 30 percent to 50 percent of the adults had made at least one suicide attempt.

10 The term *amwuunumwuun* is apparently derived from the root *mwuu*, meaning "severed, broken apart, torn apart" (Goodenough and Sugita 1990, 498).

11 Menninger, for example, termed suicide "homicide to the 180th degree" and inferred that all suicides involve a wish to kill, a wish to be killed, and a wish to die (1938). A comparable Micronesian interpretation might be that suicides involve a wish to be loved.

12 Earlier ethnographers described the *amwuunumwuun* strategy quite explicitly, although without labeling it as such. Ann Fischer wrote: "When a Trukese child's needs grow to the point where the frustration is too great for him to bear, he has one weapon which is almost sure-fire against the frustrating adult. He runs away. Members of the family welcome him back affectionately from such an escapade, and will make greater efforts to appease him" (1950, 87).

13 See Rubinstein 1984 for a fuller account of this culturally typified scenario.

14 Among the pre-1960 suicides, the anger and shame types are much more comparable in frequency, 32 percent and 27 percent respectively.

15 The frequency of male-female conflicts that incite "jealousy" suicides show enormous variation across different Micronesian cultural groups and very likely are associated with cultural differences in female status and male-female relations. In Yap, where male status provides a much greater prerogative for a jealous or displeased man to beat his wife, there has not been a single suicide case that could be categorized as a "jealousy" suicide. In the Marshall Islands, on the other hand, suicides brought on by conflict with a spouse or lover are the most common type and outnumber suicides occasioned by conflict with parents. Significantly, Yapese suicides also show a higher proportion of females than in any other group in Micronesia. In the Marshall Islands, female suicides are nearly nonexistent.

Male-female conflicts, however, may have been more important in actuating suicides in the past. Among the earlier (pre-1960) cases, suicides related to conflicts with spouse outweigh cases occasioned by conflicts with parents. This pattern is consistent with some earlier ethnographic descriptions (eg, Fischer 1950, 128-129), which indicate that affinal relationships traditionally were more problematic than other relationships.

16 Among the young male suicides aged 15-29, 52 percent were intoxicated at the time of their death, and 38 percent had a history of alcohol abuse or marijuana use. These data need to be understood, however, in the context of the very widespread alcohol use among this age group in Micronesia, and the exaggerated emotional outbursts in the culturally patterned comportment of drunks (Marshall 1979).

17 Palau is unique in the high correlation between suicide and mental illness. Out of a total of 98 suicide cases, 36 (37 percent) were identified as suffering from severe mental illness, mostly psychoses such as schizophrenia or manic depression. At the other extreme is the Marshall Islands, where only 13 out of 197 suicide cases (7 percent) showed any signs of mental illness.

18 It is very difficult to statistically compare the population of suicides with the general Micronesian population on a scale of educational attainment, because the average educational level in Micronesia has risen significantly during the thirty-four-year time span represented by the suicide data, and data on average educational level have not been compiled. Furthermore, the young age of many of the suicide victims skews the sample toward abbreviated educational careers.

19 The subsistence sector in the Federated States of Micronesia accounts for slightly over half of the labor force, which compares with the percentage of suicide victims unemployed (Federated States of Micronesia 1985, 91).

20 My generalizations here on adolescent socialization and change in Micro-

nesia are based mainly on observations within two societies, Fais Island in the Yap Outer Islands, and the island of "Sima's Story" within Chuuk Lagoon. These sites are representative of two points along the spectrum of modernization in Micronesia. Fais is a remote island accessible until recently only by monthly or two-monthly government freighters from Yap that carry store goods, passengers, and government officials. The island is still largely self-sufficient and follows a fairly traditional lifestyle, notwithstanding the presence of a small Catholic church and an elementary school, both established during the American administration. The research site in Chuuk Lagoon is a typical peri-urban island within commuting distance of Weno, a major population center.

21 Another institutional compensation for the young man's loss of a place in his own household is the relationship of fictive or promised brother. Gladwin and Sarason (1953, 275) made the point in regard to Chuuk that young men in adolescence surround themselves with "brothers" who will ideally be companions for life. Adolescents construct these new affiliations in response to the tension created by their displacement from their household; the "brother" ties later lose importance, after the adolescents enter into stable marriages and regain domestic security.

22 Hezel (1989) has elaborated on the impact of the cash economy on the Micronesian family and its consequences for youth suicide. In particular, he has described the "delicate balances" between mother's and father's side that characterized the traditional Micronesian family. Hezel has associated the high rates of youth suicide with the attenuation of lineage and collateral ties, resulting in fathers having to assume a heavier burden of economic responsibility and, in turn, increasing conflicts between parents and their adolescent sons.

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### *Abstract*

Youth suicide has reached epidemic proportion in Micronesia over the past two decades. Suicides display remarkable cultural patterning in the typical actors, methods, motivational themes, and precipitating social scenarios. The focus of contemporary high rates is among young men aged fifteen to twenty-four, who hang themselves following incidents of conflict with parents. Predominant themes invoked in adolescent suicide accounts involve anger and suffering at the hands of their parents, and feelings of familial rejection juxtaposed with reaffirmations of filial love. Less frequent are themes involving personal shame over violations of fundamental social rules. In situations of both "anger" and "shame" suicides, the primary locus of conflict is within close family relations.



The suicides appear as an extreme form of an accustomed pattern of resolving conflict with senior family members by withdrawing from the scene.

In this article I employ one paradigmatic case history to provide a description of the cultural construction and social dynamics of contemporary adolescent suicide in Micronesia. The suicide phenomenon is situated within recent changes in the stage of adolescent male socialization in Micronesian societies. For adolescent males of earlier generations, social involvement at the level of lineage and clan activities provided important support. The recent rapid shift from subsistence exchange to cash economy has severely attenuated lineage and clan structures and, by undermining the process of adolescent socialization, has set the stage for high rates of suicide among young men. Finally, I explore the potential for suicide modeling and contagion among Micronesian youth.