

Chapter 6

TRUKESE SUICIDE

Francis X. Hezel, S.J.

Truk, an island group with a population of 40,000 and situated in the geographical center of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, has been experiencing what may be called an epidemic of suicide since the early 1970s (Rubinstein 1981, 1982, 1983; Hezel, 1977).

Suicide is no new phenomenon in Trukese culture, to be sure. At the turn of the century Protestant missionaries recorded several hangings, two of them by wives of their own native teachers who were thought to be "homesick," and two others by students at the mission boarding school (ABCFM Logan, 3 & 10 Mar 1899). There were a handful of suicides reported during the Japanese administration of the islands between the world wars, and even more during the American administration that followed. During the 1960s there were 13 recorded suicides in all. All of which suggests that suicide is endemic to Truk, as it is to the rest of Micronesia.

In the last decade or so, however, the suicide rate has jumped enormously. From 1971 through 1983 there have been 129 recorded suicides in Truk, for an average of 10 a year. This yields a rate of about 30 per 100,000 — three times the world rate estimated by WHO. The Truk suicide rate has risen again between 1979 and 1982 to an average of over 15 suicides a year.

These suicides occur predominantly among young males between the ages of 15 and 30. Ninety-three percent of the victims are males. About 70 percent of the successful suicides fall within the 15-30 age bracket, with a median age of 20 for victims. The rate for Trukese males of this age group is a shocking 200 per 100,000, about ten times the suicide rate for American youths of the same age (Rubinstein 1983).

Circumstances of Death

The method of suicide used in the overwhelming majority of cases is hanging but there are a few cases of death by poison or drug overdose, and a growing number of suicides by firearms or explosives in recent years.

Suicide is frequently accompanied by heavy consumption of alcohol: about

half of the victims were drinking just before their death. Yet, it can be argued that the victim drinks in order to die at least as often as he dies because he drinks. Heavy alcohol consumption is often used by Trukese as a means of expressing sentiments and performing actions that they would otherwise find it difficult to do. I might add that increasingly in the last few years marijuana use occurs before the suicide.

Suicides in Truk generally are triggered by an apparently trivial disagreement or quarrel, as when a young man is scolded or refused some minor request by his parents or older sibling. One 16-year old boy hanged himself when his parents refused to buy him a new shirt for Christmas; another young man of 23 killed himself after his older sister would not give him the yeast he demanded for a drinking party; a 17-year old boy active in church groups left and hanged himself after being scolded by his older brother for singing too loudly in the house. Most often the suicide is precipitated by conflict with a parent or older relative, but in a few cases a spouse has been the cause of a suicide, as when a 60-year old man hanged himself after complaining that his wife was neglecting to care for him.

Trukese suicides are occasioned by what is seen to be a disruption in a significant interpersonal relationship, generally with a family member with some authority over the victim. They are never brought on by failure in business or school, sudden loss of a job or social position, or other blows to one's sense of achievement, as is commonly the case in Western and some Asian societies. Furthermore, there is almost none of the clinical depression that so often precedes suicide in Western countries and psychosis plays a part in no more than a handful of suicides.

Is the typical Trukese suicide an impulsive gesture with little regard for social reality, or is it a response to what might be called, at least from the victim's perspective, an unhappy and perhaps even oppressive family situation? The trivial nature of the precipitating incident — denial of money or food, or a scolding by a parent — at first sight appeared so disproportionate to the act that followed it that suicide seemed attributable to impulsivity. But further research revealed that behind most of those single trivial incidents that immediately preceded suicides lay a tale of longstanding family tensions and conflicts.

It appears that many of the suicide victims have, in fact, experienced

stormy relations with their family for months or even years. One young boy hanged himself after his father ordered him to do something that he did not want to do, but the father had provoked growing resentment in his son through his insults and beatings. An 18-year old girl took an overdose of Darvon after being scolded by her older sister, but she had also been hurt by the separation of her parents and the remarriage of her mother some months before. Another victim, an 18-year old boy who wrote a letter just before his death stating that he was tired of living, had been unhappy for some time at his mother's new spouse and the man's treatment of him and his brothers. In all these cases the final rebuff simply provides the occasion for the victim's angry outburst against all the misunderstandings and reproofs directed at him.

This is not to deny, however, that an element of impulsivity exists in all suicides, and that in some this element looms quite large. Impulsive suicides do happen, especially in the case of young people in their early or middle teens, but they are not as frequent as a quick survey of the case data might lead one to think.

Angry Suicides: Amwunumwun

There is a strong pattern that emerges in 74 out of 96 cases of Trukese suicides with sufficient detail to form conclusions on the reason for suicide. This pattern follows these lines: the victim, usually a young man and often intoxicated, hangs himself after he is scolded, refused a request, or otherwise rebuffed by parents or an older sibling. The motive that is almost universally attributed to the victim by family and friends, as well as by those who have survived suicide attempts themselves, is anger rather than shame or any other emotion. This pattern is so common and so recognizable by local people that it can be regarded as the folk explanation of suicide.

The anger that is expressed through the suicide is what American mental health personnel in Micronesia rightly have termed "retroreflective anger" — anger turned inward by the victims upon themselves. Where they may have erred, however, was in assuming that this was a pathological mode of expression instead of an exigency of a culture that prohibits the venting of strong negative feelings towards parents and older kin. In Truk, one does not display such feelings towards one who is superior in terms of age and social status, particularly towards one with a special claim to love and respect.

Cultural restrictions on the expression of anger are extremely important in

understanding Trukese suicide and its motives. For a young man to commit suicide because of a quarrel with a younger brother is virtually unheard of in Truk, because the young man could deal with the problem much more directly by simply thrashing his younger brother or verbally abusing him. Men would normally deal with recalcitrant wives in the same way, although there are a few exceptional cases in which the husband has reputedly killed himself following an argument with a wife. A common enough cause of suicide is the refusal of the victim's parents to approve his choice of a marriage partner; but this is motivated by anger at his parents rather than the thought of a life apart from the young lady in question. A young man would never entertain the thought of suicide if his marriage plans were frustrated by the girl's family; he would adopt less introverted means of displaying his displeasure.

In the eyes of Trukese, there are very few "significant others" whose rejection, real or imagined, would prompt a person to commit suicide. For the young man they would include classificatory older brothers and parents in his direct line or perhaps once removed. Other distant members of the family normally could not precipitate a suicide by scolding or rebuking him. This is all the more true of those not related by blood or affinal ties, even though they hold a high status in the community. Hence, the school teacher, pastor, village chief, or mayor could not impel a young man to suicide no matter how severely they chastised him.

When a Trukese is hurt and angered by someone he loves and respects, he commonly uses a strategy that is called amwunuwun. The refusal of a boy to eat when his parents have offended him is an example of amwunuwun; another is the openly promiscuous conduct of a girl who, in anger at her parents' conduct, "goes to the beach" to signal her feelings. A young man who wishes to protest some demand of his father — such as, in one actual case, his request to enjoy sexual relations with his son's wife — may stab himself in the arm or inflict other injury upon himself.

Amwunuwun, therefore, is a strategy of withdrawal or self-abasement used to show to those one must both love and obey that one is hurt by them. The act of amwunuwun is intended not principally to inflict revenge — although it would be naive to maintain that there is nothing of this in the act — but to dramatize one's anger, frustration and sorrow in the hope that the present unhappy situation will soon be remedied. If the one who employs amwunuwun is trying to shame the one who has offended him it is always with the intention of

showing the offending party the sad state into which their relationship has fallen so that he will take steps to restore it to what it once was or should have been.

Suicide, in the overwhelming majority of Trukese cases, must be understood as a kind of amwunumwun. Indeed, it is the extreme form of amwunumwun since it means inflicting the ultimate harm upon oneself in order to compel the parents or others to recognize the damage they have done and to repair it. This type of suicide can be, paradoxically, a gesture of both despair and hope at one and the same time. To the extent that the suicide represents a considered judgment rather than simply an impulsive act, it is a sign of despair at the possibility of retrieving a central relationship here and now. On the other hand, the suicide also exhibits some optimism that the relationship, even if doomed as long as the victim lives, might be salvaged on the other side of the grave. We might note in passing that this strategy does not imply a belief in the after-life (although virtually all Trukese are at least nominally Christian); it merely rests upon the survival of one's memory among the living. The victim's life may have been a constant struggle with his family while he was with them, but his removal from the family through death will change everything and guarantee that he is restored to his former rightful place in their eyes. Far from being a vindictive act in which the victim takes his last revenge, suicide presupposes a continuing regard for the family and an acknowledgement of the preciousness of family bonds.

Young suicide victims, often manifest what might appear to be a surprising concern for their place in the family after their death. One young man, a few hours before he went out to hang himself, made an imprint of his foot in wet cement and wrote his name above the footprint with the remark, "They will remember me by this always." Another young man, without any trace of facetiousness, told his grandmother before his suicide to remember him the next day as the family ate sardines at the funeral feast. Two boys, on different occasions and for different reasons, hanged themselves in such a way as to pay tribute to their respective bond brothers, each of whom was himself a victim of suicide. Each of the two was virtually assured of winning a permanent place in the affection of his adoptive family by advertising his love for the dead son and by timing this display for maximum effect.

While focusing on the positive elements of suicidal amwunumwun, we should not forget that this is essentially an act of anger. Although it may imply

devotion and love in the best traditional sense, it is also an act of self-destruction. As such, it should be the last desperate recourse in the repertoire of the young man who is hurt by his family. Yet, other milder forms of amwunumwun seem to be increasingly ignored by today's youth in favor of immediate recourse to suicide.

Shame Suicides: Reverse "Amwunumwun"

A secondary pattern of suicide, that appears in 15 of the 96 cases, represents the obverse side of the amwunumwun type. Here again the etiology can be traced to the perception, whether well founded or not, that a critical relationship is threatened. In this pattern however the victim does not see himself as the offended party, as in the amwunumwun form of suicide, but as the offender. His suicide, which is motivated principally by fear or shame rather than anger, is a response to the realization that he has done something that will have driven a wedge between himself and his family. The victim's strategy, in keeping with the common tendency throughout Micronesia and Polynesia, is to withdraw from a conflict-laden situation. This means of resolution is especially favored when the conflict occurs between members of the same family.

A striking example of this pattern occurred some years ago when a young man in his mid-20s shot himself in the presence of his older brother because he suspected that a crime he had committed some months before had been discovered by his older brother. Another young man, who beat up his wife and mother-in-law when they embarrassed him by telling him in public that they did not have enough money for their movie tickets, hanged himself soon afterwards in shame at what he had done. Another young man, this one in his late teens, was so ashamed of the foul language he had shouted out on the road the night before while he was drunk that he instructed his mother to apologize to anyone he may have offended and hanged himself.

Perhaps the clearest illustrations, however, are those that involve unacceptable sexual conduct. There are four persons, all of them in their late teens or early twenties, who hanged themselves shortly after their incestuous love affairs came to light. Each of them was involved in a sexual relationship with a first cousin, and each was presumably ashamed at the public disgrace for them and their families that would follow the disclosure of their relationship. Some years ago, a married woman who had fallen in love and run off with her

daughter's fiance committed suicide rather than face the shame of confronting the daughter that she had injured. In a more recent case that followed the same lines a young man who had been having sexual relations with his older brother's wife killed himself as soon as he had reason to suspect that his brother knew about the affair.

To attribute these suicides to a sense of personal shame is far too broad an explanation. What is at issue here is not the disapproval that the victims can expect from the community for their wrongdoing, but the effect of this disapproval on their family. The young man who is known to have been having a sexual relationship with a woman classified as his "sister" has to contend with the damage that he has done to his family's reputation in the eyes of the community, apart from the friction within family circles that his liaison might have touched off. But beyond this, he has reason to fear that he will not be trusted again by the family and that his relationship with one or several of his close relatives will be seriously harmed by the episode.

Under these circumstances, the offender might well choose to remove himself from the scene of the disgrace as a means of repairing to some extent the damage he has done to his family. This is a common theme in the interpretations that Trukese place on such suicides as these. The victim probably sees his suicide less as an atonement for his sins than as a way of ridding the family of a presence that, in his judgment, would be a constant irritant. With his death he can hope that relations within the family would again become tranquil and that outsiders would have far less reason to continue deriding the family for his misdeed.

Psychotic Suicides

There is one last group of Trukese suicide victims — those who are mentally disturbed. In recent years there have been seven suicides by young people who have been certified as psychotic, most of them schizophrenic. Each of these victims was recognized by the community as mentally aberrant, and their suicides were attributed to their mental condition. Most of them had previous suicide attempts, some of them several. Their problems were, in most cases, compounded by paranoia, which interfered with family relationships and put increasing strain on everyone in the family.

Clustering and Contagion

These patterns of suicide, pronounced as they are, can provide us with a better understanding of the cultural context in which Trukese suicide occurs and the social meanings that it bears. Still, we must be wary of investing suicide with an overly rational explanation, and positing too conscious a link between means and end. There will always remain an irrational, even an anti-rational, element in all suicide, whatever the culture in which it occurs. Any attempt to explore the etiology of Trukese suicide, therefore, must take into account modeling: the influence of suicides on the decision of subsequent victims.

Clustering, both geographical and chronological, is a significant feature of Trukese suicide and suggests a "contagion" effect. In the ten-month period between April 1982 and February 1983, for example, there were six suicides on Fefan, an island that until recently has had a surprisingly low rate of suicide. Yet these six suicides represent almost half of the total for Truk during this period. The clustering was especially tight in the case of a single village on Toloas Island in December 1975 when two suicides and one unsuccessful attempt occurred within five days. Much the same thing happened four years later when another spate of two suicides and a suicide attempt occurred in the same village within four days, with the attempter hanging himself at the grave of a friend who had taken his life the day before. On Tol a few months later a suicide was followed by the attempts of two other members of the family to kill themselves, although these attempts can be traced to a family quarrel that broke out shortly after the funeral. The frequent clustering found in Trukese suicides underlines the importance of modeling in precipitating suicide.

The conclusion that we may draw from our brief survey of the cultural context of suicide in Truk is that suicide is strongly related to the threat, whether real or merely perceived, of rejection by the family. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the same holds true for Ponape, Kosrae, the atolls of the west-central Carolines, the Marshalls and the Gilberts. Hence, what we have described appears to be, in fact, a "nuclear Micronesian" pattern of suicide.

Having considered the cultural significance of the suicide act and the social context in which it occurs we may go on to examine Trukese suicides briefly from three other perspectives:

- 1) social environment, especially among the young with emphasis on those factors that might incline them toward suicide;
- 2) personal profile of victims, including both life history and personality traits;
- 3) familial relationships, as they have changed in recent years.

Social Environment

Beyond the cultural factors already discussed, there are several features in the social environment that may have the effect of facilitating suicide.

First, there is a sense of resignation about death that proceeds in part from the fatalism that is so deeply embedded in the mindset of Trukese. On top of this, there is the cultivated indifference to death and personal danger that young men particularly are expected to show as an indication of bravery. To be a real Trukese youth is to accept high-risk situations and even to search them out, thereby showing that one does not shrink from a brush with death. This is manifest in drinking behavior and fighting as well as in suicide.

Second, there is a strong cultural emphasis among Trukese youth of advertising their sufferings. The woes and sorrows of young people are scrawled on their shirts and on public walls for all to see. To suffer, for young Trukese, is a proud part of life.

Third, suicide is legitimated as an option for Trukese since so many others have already taken this course. There is something acceptable about suicide, if only because it is a road well traveled. Suicide has become a favorite theme in conversation and local love songs; it represents an option that is a very real one for Trukese youth today.

Fourth, suicide furnishes a form of recognition for the young, one of the very few that exist. The mourning and grief at the funeral perhaps provides the young man with more attention in death than he received in life. The comment of one Trukese boy as he watched women crying for a suicide victim and friend of his was: "How nice it would be to have all those people crying and making a fuss over me. Maybe I should hang myself."

Personal Profile

The personal profile of Trukese suicide victims is of a young man who is traditional in many respects. Certainly he is not among the most acculturated young men of his society. The victim is typically from an outlying area rather

than the district center, although not from one of the outer islands. He certainly has no more by way of educational and occupational achievements than the average Trukese, and possibly somewhat less. Sixty percent of Trukese suicide victims never had more than an elementary education, and two-thirds had no full-time occupation.

The average victim is a young man whose attainments have been modest by western standards. He is often enough a dutiful son, but without high interest or involvement in church and community affairs. About 75% of the Trukese victims are unmarried. We might describe the average victim as a person whose arenas of competence outside of the family are rather few. He is not a successful business entrepreneur, a well-placed government official, or a standout student. His is the profile of a person who may generally lack the kind of satisfactions that might afford support and act as a buffer when he runs into family difficulties. By the same token, since he is without these other satisfactions, he may invest even more of himself in his relationship with his family. Thus interpersonal problems with his family find him all the more vulnerable (Hezel 1981).

Although there is no single personality type that can be called suicidal, two personality configurations show up with some frequency in the data. The first is what may be called the "spoiled kid" syndrome. This young man has a privileged position in his family. He is often either the eldest or youngest, has been treated with special favor by his parents, and is used to having things very much his way. When this kind of person is snubbed by his family or denied a request, the rebuff is especially hard for him to accept. The second is the "quiet kid" syndrome, in which the young man is withdrawn and uncommunicative. This kind of person tends to be highly controlled and ordinarily keeps a tight check on his emotions. Nonetheless, when he is sufficiently provoked, he can explode in sudden violent rage. Both syndromes are well represented among suicide victims in Truk.

Familial Relationships

While we have tried to situate Trukese suicide in its socio-cultural setting, perhaps the most critical question remains unanswered. Why the enormous increase in suicides in recent years? The blame is usually put on rapid modernization and the social change that it brings, but this reply is so vague as to be practically useless. Furthermore, as both Don Rubinstein and I

have noted, there is no simple one-to-one correlation between exposure to cultural change and the risk of suicide. Surely the term "cultural change" must be unpacked and more specificity must be sought.

Some locate the problem in the increase in pathogenic personality types brought on by social change. H.B.M. Murphy, the noted authority on transcultural psychology, argues that the suicides are the product of a narcissistic personality, a pathological type that has proliferated in the islands because of detrimental child-rearing techniques among some women (Murphy 1982:167-8, and personal communication). Others ascribe the increase in suicide to changes in the reward and role system in the community. Rubinstein and I look elsewhere to explain the suicide epidemic, however. We look to the changing values, roles and structures of the Trukese family itself.

Certain value changes, and a concomitant change of expectations on the part of both youth and their parents, has undoubtedly added to the tensions between them. Adults today often expect their sons to be wage-earners and to support them by a share of their salary as well as by participating in traditional food-preparation chores. The judgment of adults on the personal success of their sons is increasingly influenced by these new expectations, however unrealistic young Trukese may judge such expectations.

On the other hand, Trukese youth have new and higher expectations of their own. They have come to expect of their parents a show of affection and love that is modeled after western expectations even if it is manifested by quite different forms. Trukese youth set great stock in receiving gifts of food, money and clothing from their parents as assurance of this love and support. Moreover, Trukese young people today have to come to feel that they have certain "rights" — a right to leisure, a right to choose their own spouse, a right to come and go as they wish. In the eyes of many youth, parents' denial of these rights is a sign of callous disregard for their happiness.

The difference in values between old and young simply multiplies the occasions of clashes within the family, just as it impedes attempts to resolve these clashes.

Changes in the role of the young Trukese male have also left him more vulnerable than formerly. The increased family size has lightened his responsibilities in the area of traditional food preparation since there are more brothers to share in the task. The growing dependence on store-bought goods only tends to reduce these responsibilities still further. As the young

man sees his own contribution to the welfare of his family becoming more and more limited, he will tend to regard himself as useless.

Finally, the structure of the family has changed in ways that increase tensions between parents and children and between older and younger siblings. Relationships such as these, which were always seen as fraught with dangers, were carefully controlled in the past. Traditional family structures, utilizing different avoidance mechanisms, permitted what we might call a "comfortable distance" between parents and children as well as between siblings. Much of the responsibility for socializing young males after adolescence fell to lineage mates in a clubhouse-type process. Authority over the young man was diffused to his maternal uncle and others.

Recent changes have had the cumulative effect of narrowing kinship control. The influence of the maternal uncles has decreased as the parents themselves assume more direct authority over their children. The informal lineage-managed education system has disappeared years ago. All of this has led to the reduction of the comfortable distance between father and son and the increased face-to-face contact between them, with greater opportunities than ever for the sort of misunderstanding and antagonism that precipitates suicide.

In summary, then, recent cultural change has made family relationships more problematic in the following ways. Value shifts, as they have changed perceptions, have made communication within the family more difficult and open to misunderstanding. At the same time, altered family structures have made this communication more frequent. Meanwhile, because of role changes, the young man's importance in and to the family has become more problematic.

Summary

Suicide, embedded as it is in Trukese culture, will no doubt remain as endemic to Truk as cholera. Yet the epidemic proportions of suicide in recent years are one measure, among others, of the upheaval that has been visited on the islands by rapid social change in recent years. Suicide stands, at least in my mind, as the single greatest social problem in Truk. There may be little we can do to change the cultural elements that invest suicide with its meaning, but we can work to reduce its frequency in Truk.

REFERENCES

- [ABCFM] American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
1852- Letters and Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign
1909 Missions: Mission to Micronesia, 1852-1909. 19 Vols. Harvard
University, Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA.
- Hezel, Francis X.
1977 Suicide Epidemic Among Micronesian Youth. South Pacific Bulletin
27(2):5-10.
- 1981 Summary of Conference on Suicide in Truk. Moen, Truk: Micronesian
Seminar.
- Murphy, H.B.M.
1982 Comparative Psychiatry. New York: Springer Press.
- Rubinstein, Donald H.
1981 Suicide Characteristics and Rates in Micronesia. In Prioritization of
Mental Health Services Development for Pacific Islanders, Workshop
Report. W-S Tseng and B. Young, ed. Department of Psychiatry,
University of Hawaii School of Medicine, January 26-28. Pp. 73-84.
- 1982 A Survey of Adolescent Suicide in Micronesia. Pacific Health 15:2-5.
- 1983 Epidemic Suicide Among Micronesian Adolescents. Social Science and
Medicine 17:657-665.