

## **Cultural factors and Suicide in Guam**

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Suicide in Micronesia is not a recent issue in the area and has been recorded by several anthropologic studies, chronicles and reports during the last centuries. Suicide is a radical action that has to be considered through a multidisciplinary approach in order to guide an appropriate answer. In this communication I will explore some cultural factors that may facilitate the taking of decisions by the individual that decide to take out his/her life away. We consider that the ultimate cause, and therefore solution, will be always spiritual but an accurate knowledge of the cultural basis that surround this phenomenon could help to develop a more effective pastoral and social answer.

Twice a month there is bad news about suicides taking place in Guam. This is especially painful when the deceased is not more than nine or ten years old. What kind of suffering these kids are facing? Why they choose the only path that has no way back? What cultural factors facilitate the taking of decision of a pre-adolescent? In these lines I will try to present some ideas in form of hypothesis willing to contribute to the understanding of an existential and sociocultural problem that has created so much pain among several families in Guam. I will consider three elements: postmortem destiny and death management; cultural pressure, gossip and shame; and love affairs: love, hate and indifference.

### Postmortem destiny and death management in Guam.

One important factor that must be relevant when thinking about the taking of decision from the suicidal will be, with no doubt, the postmortem destiny. Traditionally we consider Guam as a Catholic island<sup>[1]</sup> but the Christian Catholicism has here its own cultural characteristics due to historical processes of syncretism and the tools that were used to evangelize the people of the Marianas. One of the most important elements used by the Jesuits in the first evangelization of the island (1668-1778) was the devotion to the Holy Virgin and the images associated to Her. Today, the Rosary and the devotion to the Virgin Mary plays a fundamental role in death management since the popular believe is that Mary has the power to save the souls from hell, what is a not orthodox thought.

Traditionally for the Catholic Church, after death and the final judgment, the soul could reach three states: heaven, hell and purgatory. Meanwhile the first and the second are eternal destinations, the third is a doctrine of faith formulated at the Councils of Florence and Trento (CEC 1031) that imply a temporal state that will end in heaven. Those who die in a state of mortal sin and are perseverant on it until the last moment will go to hell eternally meanwhile those '[...] who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.' (CEC 1030). The popular accepted believe in Guam is that not Chamorro will go hell as far as he

or she has family that pray the rosary for them during the funeral rituals. Even if the deceased person commit suicide his salvation will not depend on his personal conversion but on the efforts and prayers of the taotao or familia; the extended family. Salvation is a matter of living relatives and not of personal decisions or behaviors. Sins are punished in the flesh while the responsible of the transgression is still alive[2].

The funerals are liturgically oriented to the prayer of the rosary. A public pre-burial novena and a more intimate post-burial novena plus the one year anniversary novena will be the key tools to attain heaven. The figure that centered the scene during these vital crises is the Holy Virgin. But what is the role of Mary for the Chamorros in death management and postmortem destination? How She took this function and why? There are some important precedents that I think are important in order to understand this issue: the pre-colonial worships to the ancestors and the Marian devotions, in concrete three advocations of the Virgin and her images: Nuestra Señora de la Luz, the Virgin of Carmel and the Virgin of Camarin, actual patron Saint of the Island of Guam.

The traditional worship to the ancestor is well documented by the first missionaries in Guam[3]. Marianos, said Garcia[4] in the hagiography of Father San Vitores, '[...] recognize the immortality of the soul and speak of hell and paradise, to which men go for no other merit or demerit than that of whether they died a natural or violent death.' And he add: 'Those who die of violence, they say, go to the inferno they call zazarraguan, or the house of Chayfi, who is the devil who has a forge in which he heats them as iron, and hammers them continually. Those who die a natural death go to another place beneath the earth, which is their paradise, where there are bananas, coconuts, sugar cane, and others fruits of the earth'. Once the missionaries began his pastoral activity, the access into the new Catholic heaven was conditioned by the acceptance of the Christian faith, done effective by the reception of the Sacrament of Baptism. Only those receiving the Baptism were worthy to reach the heavenly promises. Those ancestor that did not achieve this Christian initiation, wether because they refused it, or because they died before the arrival of the Spanish, have remained until today in the island, occupying those lands that are still wild or not christianize, owning the night time -lemlem taotao-, and following a precolonial way of living.

One consequence of this first evangelization was a break, a division, in the space-time of the Marianas as it is still perceived today: light and dark time, baptized and not baptized spirits; wild and christianize land; past and present history. A second aspect to consider regarding the postmortem destiny is that the spirits of the ancestor were not exorcized or definitely expelled from the Marianas and some believes associated to them have remained until today intermingled with Judeo-Christian and colonial traditions -Spanish and North American-[5]. If before, the spirits of the ancestors were call aniti, translated by the missionaries as demons, today, a semantic switch has been produced and now they are called taotaomon'a -spirits of our clan-. Great numbers of Chamorros, no matter the educative level, social position, or religion, believe today in the taotaomon'a and have experienced occasional encounters with them in the wild.

The Marian devotion is another element that has a deep and main role in death management and postmortem destiny in Guam. The Jesuits introduced strongly the

devotion to the Virgin Mary and the Marianos accepted it successfully. One of the advocations of the Virgin that was introduced in Guam in the eighteenth Century will be highly clarifying for the propose of this work: the advection and congregation of Nuestra Señora de la Luz -Our Lady of the Light-, founded in Guam in 1758 by the Jesuit Father Francisco Javier Reittenberger (1736-1767)[6].

The Virgin of the Light had Her origins in a vision of a nun from Palermo produced in 1722. She saw the Virgin Mary clothe in a white tunic and cover with a blue cloak holding the soul of a man from falling into the jaws of Leviathan. \Two angels were crowning her and, meanwhile, baby Jesus was offering Her His burning heart. This vision was recovered in a painting and in 1732 the canvas arrived to Guanajuato, to a Jesuit mission. From there the devotion to this advection of Our Lady grew and was spread across the Jesuit Missions reaching Marianas in 1758.

During the Inquisitorial process to Fr. Reittenberger for solicitation on 1774, in the background of this process, it was the concern that 'some priest and believers could be induce to error and ingeniously think that the Virgin herself was capable of preventing sinners falling into the jaws of the Leviathan'[7]. This devotion was not outlawed on the Marianas Island but presumably the Augustinians, successors of the Jesuits in Guam, acted as the Bishop of Oaxaca recommended in the 4th Provincial Mexican Council in 1771, that is, to erase the Leviathan from the painting 'in order to avoid the erroneous or pernicious trust that this might induce the Most Holy Virgin to remove some of the souls condemned to Hell'[8], and '[...] additionally the Bishops of Puebla de los Ángeles, Durango and other prelates added that "all the hieroglyphics must be erased and replaced by the received ones that commonly appear with images of the [Immaculate] Conception".'[9].

Coello de la Rosa conclude his research affirming that 'without the Jesuits's support and guidance, the congregation of the Virgin of Light ended up languishing and dying out on the Marianas Islands.' But even the Congregation of Our Lady of the Light could decline and eventually disappear, my actual ethnographic research suggest that the devotion survived linked to other devotions and images.

The image of Our Lady of the Light has today totally disappear from Guam but other devotions are still active, among them two are specially representative and popular: the devotion to the Virgin of Carmel and the devotion to the Virgin of Fatima. This advocations of the Virgin are invoked to save souls from Hell. Chamorros of today believe that those that die wearing the Carmelite Scapular will not go hell and that those who pray the rosary regularly will neither go hell. An old Chamorro woman from Merizo told me that even if you kill yourself but you have a family that pray the novenas for you, you will not go hell; maybe you have to wait one year or more in the purgatory, but eventuality you will reach heaven. At the beginning of the mass in the parishes the intentions for the deaths last five minutes reading a long list of people that have passed away. Rosary and intentions assure everlasting life in heaven for the Chamorros.

Postmortem destiny it is always heaven for Chamorro people what may condition in some way the last decision when dealing with suicidal thoughts. The moral responsibility of the

act is not taken into consideration since eternity is granted by external means. The prayer of the rosary performed and maintained by the older woman of the kin is a fundamental tool in death management, grieving and postmortem destiny. Funerals in Guam are a key to understand culture and kinship relation, and reciprocity[10]. The lineage -taotao- is maintained and sustained by death what makes Chamorro people be linked to Catholic practices especially oriented to funeral rituals.

### Cultural pressure, Gossip and Shame

In all traditional societies gossip and envy plays a fundamental role in social control and behavior. The consequences of gossip in a small island, where personal actions can hardly be hidden and where bloodlines are intermingled and well known, will last for long periods and affect the whole lineage. The behavior of one individual will impact in the status of the whole extended family bringing shame or honor to the whole taotao and the last name will be associated to this action for many years. This element has to be considered when thinking of suicide.

The casuistic of suicides in Guam and Micronesia[11] present some cases that match into this category called 'altruistic'[12] or 'shame suicides'[13]. One of the most impactful cases produced in Guam was the suicide of Gov. Bordallo that in some spheres has become a sign of nationalist Chamorro resistance against the colonial power. Governor Bordallo was being processed by the FBI for corruption when he shouted himself in a public area of Guam, wrapped into a Guam flag under the statue of Chief Kepuha. He received a funeral of State and today his wife is representative for Guam in the United States senate.

Chamorros know that to commit suicide is a sin[14] but no sin, as we have explained before, will irremediably lead the soul of the deceased into Hell as far as he or she has a family that will pray the rosary regularly and perform rightly the funerals. If the sins are severe, the prayer has to be more intense, but sooner or later the dead will reach his final destination, heaven. Bordallo's suicide is not the first 'altruistic' or 'shame' suicide in Guam but is definitely fundamental in the recent history of this island. The social acceptance of this kind of suicides blurred the real causes of the suicidal, what is always difficult to know, and therefore, facilitated the emergence of unexpected consequences and mimetic behaviors[15].

### Love affairs: love, hate and indifference

There are other cultural elements to consider when thinking about suicide in Guam. We might mention the creation myth of Puntan and Fu'una[16] where self-sacrifice for love is presented as a life generator. The legend of the 'Two Lovers' plays an important role in the current folk tales of Guam. In this tale the lovers decide to kill themselves as a sign of eternal love that is threatened by the evil colonial forces. Love, when not corresponded to is the fuel of many cases of suicide in Micronesia[17] and folklore supports this spread behavior.

Included into this category of love affairs we might present also the revenge suicide that is performed by many teenagers and even children in Guam. A discussion with their parents leads the individual to kill him or herself. Hezel[18] propose that the ultimate cause of this typology of suicide is the decomposition of the extended family that weaken the possibilities of negotiate the fear or frustration of the young man and woman. This is with no doubt a cause but link to this element we may consider a low preparation to face frustration. This lack of defense mechanism against frustration could be originated by several reasons and it is a point that could be related to breeding practices. Finally I will like to point out what Manuel Rauchholz mention in a communication about adoption practices in Micronesia[19]. He linked adoption in Micronesia with high rate of male suicide. His study was focused in Chuuk but might be interesting to analyze the variables in Guam.

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[1] In the Census of the United States of 2000, 85% of Guam population considered themselves Christian Catholics. In this sense Martha, a Chamorro woman from Merizo told me once that she was Catholic because she was Chamorro. 'We, Chamorros, are Catholic' -she said- "But there is not another reason to be Baptize by the Catholic Church apart from this tradition".

[2] Atienza, "The Body as a Strange Attractor. New perspectives in Chamorro Identity."

[3] Driver, *The Account of Fray Juan Pobre's Residence in the Marianas, 1602*; García, *The Life and Martyrdom of the Venerable Father Diego Luis De Sanvitores of the Society of Jesus, First Apostle of the Mariana Islands and the Happenings in These Islands from the Year of One Thousand Six Hundred and Sixty-Eight, to That of One Thousand Six Hundred and Eighty-One*.

[4] Ibid. 173

[5] Flood, *Marianas Island Legends*; Van Peenen, *Chamorro Legends on the Island of Guam*.

[6] Coello de la Rosa, "The congregation of Nuestra Señora de la Luz on the Mariana Islands (1758-1776)."

[7] Ibid.

[8] Idem.

[9] Idem.

[10] Iyechad, *An Historical Perspective of Helping Practices Associated with Birth, Marriage, and Death Among Chamorros in Guam*.

[11] Hezel, "Cultural patterns in Trukese suicide"; Hezel, *From Conversion to Conquest*; Hezel, "Micronesia's Hanging Spree"; Hezel, "Suicide in the Micronesian Family."

[12] Durkheim, *Suicide, a Study in Sociology*.

[13] Hezel, "Cultural patterns in Trukese suicide."

[14] Johnson, "The Stigma of Suicide."

[15] Hezel, "Suicide on Guam: Putting It in Historical Perspective"; Booth, "The Evolution of Epidemic Suicide on Guam."

[16] Hattori, "Puntan and Fu'una: Gods of Creation | Guampedia: The Encyclopedia of Guam"; Flood, *Marianas Island Legends*.

[17] Rubinstein, "Love and suffering."

[18] Hezel, "Micronesia's Hanging Spree."

[19] Personal communication.