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Family crisis and the Yuta participation in the ritual of the dead in Okinawa

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INTRODUCTION

Any unforeseen accidental death or suicide of a person plunges the surviving family members into an acute crisis. The family crisis begins with the sudden onset of sorrow and mourning. Such psychological responses as unrelievable anger and reproach, regret and sense of liability, anxiety, irritability, depression, sleeplessness and prostration strike the family. Among the other responses the emotional reaction which occupies the core may be considered sorrow with individuality depending on the object of loss. But as observed by E. Lindeman¹⁾ and others, most grief reaction crises and related mental health crises follow a "process" in which the persons, while passing through a number of "grief work" operations presently are calmed. In any given cultural area, a family confronted with the death of a normal family member has the possibility of mitigating the shock of death and establishing psychological distance from the deceased through the process of receiving help and comfort from such persons as relatives and family, friends and acquaintances, through professional medical or priestly intervention and through the services of religious figures. Moreover, the process is further implemented by going through a varying series of grief work and ritual observances for the dead beginning with the typical burial arrangements characteristic of the particular culture area. That is to say, it is considered that the mental health risk carried by the family is normally disposed of smoothly by means of meticulously following prescribed rituals in that conventional cultural context.

BRIEF DISCUSSION OF OKINAWA'S *MABUIWAKASHI* AND *KUCHIYOSE*

The *mabuiwakashi*¹ of the Okinawa area,² which is the participation of the *yuta*³ (shaman) in the death rites is a very interesting phenomenon when seen from the above point of view. This is a ritual normally conducted by family members and blood relatives. They either gather for the ritual before the family tomb or in the house of the deceased sometime between three days and 49 days⁴ after a person's death. The purpose of this rite is to effect a separation of the soul or spirits of the living and to send the spirit of the dead to the realm of the dead without interference. The way of carrying out the rite varies depending on the area, but it is relatively common to burn incense, present water and other standard offerings, and to conduct a series of sorcerous rites which include special incantations for separating the spirit of the dead from the living. In this separation process the practice called *kuchiyose* is noteworthy. *Kuchiyose* is the practice of causing the dead persons thoughts and words to

be spoken through the borrowed mouth of the *yuta*⁵.

Through the *kuchiyose* the deceased tells the family a variety of things, then bids farewell to the blood relatives and inlaws and says he will presently proceed to the region of the dead. It is said that the cases are numerous in which the deceased will, at that time, through the *Yuta's* mouth, speak mainly of such matters as the reason for death, grudges, last will and testament, words of apology and thanks, the state of affairs in the land of the dead and give words of parting. The utterances follow a pattern of polite loneliness and the family weeps upon hearing them. In this regard, Yamashita²⁾ records such a scene in the following way :

The words of the *yuta* are spoken as in the singing and in the predeath expressions used by the deceased. The atmosphere reaches a climax with people weeping, some wailing and others calling the name of the deceased. After a while the participants, while listening to the *yuta's* words identify the *yuta* with the deceased and ask question which the *yuta* answers in response. The questions are diverse, ranging from the situation in the after world life to the distribution of the legacy.

Certainly this is an exhibition of the relationship in condensed form of the deceased to the family.

While it is considered that this rite serves the purpose of a memorial service for the dead from the original peculiar Okinawan cultural point of view⁶ concerning the next world and the departed soul, it might also be mentioned that as far as the *kuchiyose* is concerned, the attendant secondary psychological effects specially treated below can be seen as very great.

1. Intercourse and communication between the deceased and the family which abruptly ceased with the unexpected death of the member are revived through hearing the *kuchiyose* and an outlet⁷ is provided for the family's feelings of sorrow and grief which heretofore could not be relieved. In short, a catharsis effect is produced.

2. Unsettled and outstanding problems between the deceased and the family are either liquidated, or a realistic direction for their settlement is suggested.

3. The grief work of the family is facilitated through the recollections which occur since it happens that on this occasion they again review the path the deceased member's life had followed up to that point in time.

4. An opportunity arises for comprehension and acceptance of the meaning of death, no matter how it occurred, in a context of supernatural causality³⁾. It follows that this fixes a kind of brake on bringing up any fresh complications and creating tense relationships.

5. It is possible with the greatest certainty to mediate negotiations between the living and the deceased and provide a customized parting ritual between them on a realistic level.

Finally, among the ceremonies repeatedly carried out for the dead during the initial 49 days following death, *kuchiyose* and *mabuiwakashi* have the most dramatic content, and also in numerous cases it has the added significance of a dynamic rite for the dead which gives a touch of finality to all the memorial rites.

The family in mourning upon passing through this rite has the possibility for the first time, not in mere custom but in reality, to escape from mourning and establish psychological

distance from the deceased. In regard to completing the *mabuiwakashi* in the mourning period time span of seven weeks or 49 days, G. Caplan⁴⁾ considers from a purely mental health point of view that the time needed to recover from a life threatening event is approximately four to six weeks. In taking up the question of the transition time after the person's death for "a soul of the dead to transform into the soul of an ancestor", Fujii⁵⁾ along with Yanagida consider that it takes 33 years from the time of the funeral. According to that, they stipulate that the first 49 days after the funeral in which the spirit is going back and forth between the home and the tomb is an extremely unstable period. When we change to the point of view of the living, we can see that this time is also the time needed for the close relatives to complete all the things needed to establish psychological distance from the deceased, or that it is the time interval needed to complete the grief work process.

The origins of the *mabuiwakashi* are obscure, but when observed on the basis of its form it seems to be a faith custom which holds two things in parallel regarding fear of the spirit of the dead. It is a memorial service for that spirit as a conclusion to the fear and an evasive procedure with regard to it. On the other hand the *kuchiyose* which is often found in the process of executing the *mabuiwakashi*, appears as a service with the purpose of pacification and repose for the soul of the dead which is in an unstable condition. When we consider it with focus on the living, however, it may be possible to view it as a shamanistic process of the *yuta* for the purpose of completing a rational rehabilitation of the family in crisis due to a member's death.

Be that as it may, with regard to *mabuiwakashi* or accompanying ceremonies seen in the Okinawa area it is possible to gather afresh the following things from the mental health or psychological point of view.

In the *mabuiwakashi* and the *kuchiyose* there are connotations of ingenious elements for obtaining the effect of solace for the wounds and complications of the love between the family and the deceased, and also to rapidly facilitate the grief work of the bereaved. While it may somewhat circumvent the matter, can we not say that the execution of this kind of memorial service helps slightly to prevent disease such as depression or psychosomatic diseases or to evade the crisis of the pathology of mental illness which originates in traditional Okinawan society. Therefore, from the mental health standpoint we should not take lightly the utility which the folk custom ritual called *mabuiwakashi* serves. In recent days it is being said that the use of the *mabuiwakashi* and *kuchiyose* have conspicuously decreased. But when it comes to the matter of modern society, especially Okinawan society's ability to provide another kind of religious ceremony, medical service, or psychological care as an alternative it must be said there is little evidence of this availability. W. P. Lebra⁶⁾ has already pointed out the situation in this regard.

Now, beside the positive benefits which have thus far been enumerated, at the same time one can consider conversely the possibility that the execution of this kind of ceremony may even evoke conflict which the family carries or arouse subliminal anxiety, contrarily raise latent problems, and complicate the situation. The case of suicide of a family member is one in which there are such issues. It will be especially important to exercise caution with regard to such elements as the strong sense of debt and self condemnation toward the deceased caused

by a suicide in the family members left behind. For the purpose of examining this kind of issue, the author will report on a case and at the same time will refer to his intervention from the basis of mental health considerations.

THE CASE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Case A ♀, 17 year old High School Student: The main complaint was non-attendance at school but the non-attendance was more "school phobia" than "refusal". The occasion for involvement in the case was an introduction by the school. It was seen as an identity diffusion somehow marked by lack of will and no energy, that is to say apathy, a sense of estrangement and fearfulness in personal relations, sensitive state, some inferiority complex, a sense of no self confidence and loss of purpose. In the initial interview the impression gained was of a young person who talked freely, naturally responding as might be expected from any high school student. Although the psychological test results showed average intelligence and personality with a number of immature areas, but it seemed that there were no findings of psychotic level sufficient measure to make an issue of. In a word, it was thought to be a type of adolescent^{(7), (8), (9)} case with a relative degree of failure or set-back responses. It seemed after three or four intensive sessions that the case would go smoothly, but after that there were unforeseen meanderings, and ultimately the client continued in interview therapy for close to a year with interruptions along the way. Finally after two months of not appearing for therapy the client dramatically ended the case in the form of a completely unforeseen suicide. Things took this turn as the client herself decided on a change of course and withdrew from the school where she was enrolled. For that reason the teachers quickly withdrew. Throughout the period there was not good contact with the family on which she depended. In this case it was a situation in which the family not only did not show much concern for the issues we raised, but in addition had numerous troubles that arose in the family circle and progressed of their own accord.

In concrete terms, one large causative factor was the fact that she did not receive enough understanding and support from her elder sister, who was a university student and the representative intellectual of the family. In that regard, perhaps it was because the elder sister had more than her share of economic and psychological burdens due to being the eldest of four siblings. But as the eldest she had a firm position, had gained a place in the teacher preparation program of a certain university, was looking forward to a future as a teacher and was a figure who ordinarily would have encouraged and scolded her younger siblings. Naturally, this elder sister with her conspicuous self possession would have taken no other than a severe view of her younger sister. The family's recognition of and responses to younger girl were represented in the words of the elder. She was regarded by the elder as "the baby of the family, selfish, spoiled, self-centered, a young miss who evaded even the slightest trouble with a sickly manner, a hopeless creature who couldn't even continue her school work". Although she showed a certain in her own way, from beginning to end the atmosphere was recognizable as one in which the elder sister said, "I can not understand why such a situation as that becomes the object of interview therapy and help". Certainly there was a recognized base of the personality of the younger in the light of which the elder sister's reception did

not seem strange. Again, the author himself was not able to detect a situation of dark pathological coloration in this personality which might demand intensive pursuit. However, even though that was the actual situation, the author as therapist purposely and continually stressed the need for concern and help from the people surrounding the client. The result was unfortunately, one in which the need was not sufficiently grasped by the family and the case took a complete turn to misfortune of its own accord.

The means of suicide was aggressive and violent in a degree not to be expected from a young girl. In the middle of the night she took a kitchen knife out into the family garden, stabbed herself in the abdomen repeatedly until she fell over dead. No sound came from her lips during that time until the dying cry at the point of death which aroused the family and brought them running to the scene. But by that time she had already expired. The elder sister who ought to have been stouthearted, cool and calm, upon seeing her dead sister fell over in a faint and was taken to the hospital by ambulance. In contrast, the mother, who ordinarily was in a dither and who had been secretly taking the client to see a *yuta* at her own request, removed the knife from the girl's abdomen and with the help of a brother moved the corpse into the living room.

From these developments, the author felt the need to open crisis intervention for the family, especially for the mother and the elder sister.

On the other hand, three days after completing the ordinary funeral services, a *mabuiwakashi* was proposed by an aunt of the main family line. From that it was naturally assumed that she expected a *kuchiyose* for the main purpose of hearing such things as the reasons for her niece's suicide. They say that although a *yuta* was called twice and the formal *mabuiwakashi* ceremonies were somehow held, the situation never progressed to the point of carrying out the *kuchiyose*. That was due to the violently strong opposition of the elder sister. She declared "that stuff is a kind of evil paganism, nothing more than superstition. It produces a thousand evils and not a single good. Sister is not going to arise in the midst of such carrying on. Furthermore, her death won't be allowed to be handled by the curiosity of a *yuta*-loving busy body aunt." The mother and the older relatives had been interested in the *kuchiyose* at the beginning, but presently they had to withdraw the proposal because they were so overwhelmed by the bombastic and persistent threatenings of the elder sister.

Instead of going through the *kuchiyose*, the elder sister nummaged the entire house, frantically dug out her sister's diary and notes and read them through desperately trying to find the cause of suicide. The notes and diary which the author came to witness and read were faithfully kept records of the therapy interviews and of the daily events of period. Happily, not much could be found that was critical of the elder sister and the family.

THE AUTHOR'S THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION AND CONSIDERATION

The main points of crisis intervention which the author set his mind to after the suicide were as follows: First, support was given to the mechanisms of rationalization of the reasons for the elder sister's rejection of the *yuta's kuchiyose* and to the means employed in that rejection. The following measures were employed with the aim of reducing the guilt feeling of the elder sister and of the family. The author stressed that the suicide was

beyond prevention, given the strength of its resolve, and that if it must be that some person must bear the blame for it then the author who had been involved in therapy must take the majority of the blame. Through the use of the diary and notes written by the lost one as an intermediary, by eliciting and by sharing reminiscences about the case, the author tried to provide an outlet for the family's grief. The outcome was that there were no serious signs of depression or other sickness which the author could recognize in the sister or others in the family.

It must be said that the risks involved in utilizing the *kuchiyose* are much too great in such cases as a suicide which carries the heavy weight of strong self-recrimination and debt with regard to the suicide victim. In the extreme eventuality that the deceased should utter words of hate or spite against the family there would be no way to help them. That would be the case even if provisionally the saving road had been opened through the performance of regular funeral services. In this suicide case there was the high probability that the mother could have brought herself to consent to the traditional ideas. But be that as it may, there was also the probable danger of indelible scars being left in the case of the elder sister. This probably would have been the case even though the elder sister thought of herself as a modern person and did not accept the traditional thinking about the *kuchiyose*. But saying that is no reason to think it would be acceptable to leave self-recrimination and debt buried in gloom. At such times, above all times, there is the need for appropriate mental health care crisis intervention which will include an opportunity for the family to verbalize feelings of guilt and self-recrimination.

SUMMARY

The author has considered the function of shamanism during the family rituals following the death of a member. He has particularly focussed on the ritual observances for the dead called *mabuiwakashi* and *kuchiyose* which are practiced in the Okinawa area. As he surmised at the outset, normally the *mabuiwakashi* and the *kuchiyose* have a positive side with an effective function, at least in the critical stage following death which influences mental health. On the other hand, as indicated by the suicide case presented in which there were twisted and complicated family dynamics and where there were family members who did not accept the traditional ideas on the subject, there is also a possibility of extreme negative effects. Not only would it not be effective for the suicide to be an occasion for *mabuiwakashi* and *kuchiyose* but the practices also have the potential of producing further dissension and bringing even further complications into the situation. At the same time, from the author's experience in the case, the need for mental health intervention and the possibility for such intervention were suggested.

NOTES

1. Even in Okinawa's main island the rites will be variously named depending on the area. Such names¹⁰⁾ as simply *akasun*, *mabuiwakashi*, *tamashiwakashi*, and *yuudachi*, *chijijsui*, *tamagaigeeshi*, *keeshiugami* are used. According to Yamashita²⁾ it is called *maburiwakashi* in the Amami Ōshima area and *kansutubakyaari* or *kampitubakyaai* around Hirara City in Miyako.

2. This is a ritual observance seen widely from the Amami Ōshima islands to Okinawa main island, and south to the Miyako and Yaeyama island groups. Recently, however, it does not seem to be as widely practiced as it was in earlier days.
3. Depending on the region or the time observed, the practice is not absolutely limited to the *yuta's* participation. There are examples of elder family members or housewives performing the rites. But at least as far as the *kuchiyose* is concerned, there is reason to think that the rite could not be done by anyone except a *yuta* type professional.
4. There is variation in the time of execution, depending on the area. For example, in such places as Miyako it is on the day of burial. In other places it may be on the second or the third day. Again it may be on every seventh day starting with the 7th day, then repeating on the 14th day (*tananka*), 21st day (*minanka*) 49th day (*shichinanka*), up the 100th day. It also seems that in deciding the time consideration is given not to exceed two months or two years counting from the sexagenary cycle, or from the day of death. Nighttime is generally prevalent; there are many cases in Amami Ōshima²⁾ of the rite being executed deep in the night.
5. It is said that the *yuta* may execute the *kuchiyose* in a possessed state where the thoughts and will of the deceased are directly reported through the mouth of the *yuta*, and that in other instances it is executed with the *yuta* acting as a messenger to the family by indirectly reporting what is heard and observed through clairvoyance and spiritual power.
6. It is reported that at death, the soul of the deceased remains at the house or tomb, or travels between the house and the tomb for 49 days following the funeral and does not proceed to the realm of the dead until 49 days have passed and the rites of *mabuiwakashi* are accomplished. It is thought that the two implications of *mabuiwakashi* are first, to prevent the spirit of the deceased from enticing the spirit of the living to the world of the dead, and second, on the basis of fully executed memorial rites, to enlighten the spirit of the deceased to the fact that it is dead and persuade the spirit to accept the inevitable and take the journey to *shigo no sekai* (the world of after death).
7. In the Okinawa area it seems that in the past there was the general custom of having wailing women present.¹⁾ Even in the author's memory of attending funeral rites as a child, the wailing of the women (blood relatives or relatives by marriage) was quite clamorous. At that time the women would take turns calling out to the deceased while all of them wailed loudly. It was a regular pattern of the time for the voices of other women around the family to raise their wailing higher and higher, alternating with the calling out to the dead person and repeating it in a certain rhythm that would carry on for a very long time. Again, in pre-war Okinawa, the sudden sound of women wailing often was a signal¹²⁾ to the village that a death had occurred. Also in the scope of the author's memory it was a regular scene at the time of putting the corpse into the casket and again at the time the casket left the house, for the women, especially the mother or wife, to raise their voices to a very high octave and cling to the casket as if it were the end of the world. It is reasoned that these burial customs were a great aid to the grief work of the family. But these conventions have steadily faded and nowadays, especially in urban areas, it seems there is a growing custom of holding funerals quietly and with good decorum. Doesn't it follow that another ave-

nue must be prepared for the grief work of the families? When seen from the point of view of that need, it seems that we absolutely can not make light of the utility of the vestigial *kuchiyose* and *mabuiwakashi* remaining at present.

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