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CULTURAL CASE STUDY

Suicide in Three East African Pastoralist Communities and the Role of Researcher Outsiders for Positive Transformation: A Case Study

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Abstract We examine cultural understandings and practices surrounding suicide in Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana pastoralists in north-central Kenya—three geographically overlapping and mutually interacting pastoralist communities. We collected our data in the context of a study of poverty, violence, and distress. In all three communities, stigma associated with suicide circumscribed individual responses to the World Health Organization's Self-Report Questionnaire, which led to an ethnographic sub-study of suicide building upon our long-standing research in East Africa on distress, violence, and death. As is true for most of sub-Saharan Africa, reliable statistical data are non-existent for these communities. Thus, we deliberately avoid making assertions about generalizable statistical trends. Rather, we take the position that ethnographically nuanced studies like the one we offer here provide a necessary basis for the respectful collection of accurate quantitative data on this important and troubling practice. Moreover, our central point in this paper is that positive transformational work relating to suicide is most likely when researcher outsiders practice 'deep engagement' while respectfully restricting their

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role to (1) iterative, community-driven approaches that contextualize suicide; and (2) sharing contextualized analyses with other practitioners. We contend that situating suicide within a broader cultural framework that includes attitudes and practices surrounding other forms of death is essential to both aspects of anthropological-outsiders' role.

Keyword Suicide · Death · Stigma · Pastoralists · Kenya

Introduction: When Deep Engagement Meets Quantitative Methodologies

In this paper, we examine suicide among East African pastoralists in three geographically overlapping and mutually interacting pastoralist communities. As is true for most of sub-Saharan Africa, reliable statistical data are non-existent for these communities. Thus, we deliberately avoid making assertions about generalizable statistical trends. Rather, we take the position that ethnographically nuanced studies like the one we offer here provide a necessary basis for the respectful collection of accurate quantitative data on this important and troubling practice. Moreover, our central point in this paper is that positive transformational work relating to suicide is most likely when researcher outsiders practice 'deep engagement' while respectfully restricting their role to (1) iterative, community-driven approaches that contextualize suicide; and (2) sharing contextualized analyses with other practitioners working with communities on suicide. We contend that situating suicide within a broader cultural framework that includes attitudes and practices surrounding other forms of death is essential to both aspects of anthropological-outsiders' role.

In 2008, we initiated a collaborative research project with Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana pastoralists in northern Kenya in order to document the broad mental and physical health costs of intercommunity violence in relation to poverty. This project emerged as a result of Straight and Pike having witnessed over the course of 20 years the dramatic shifts in community responses to increasing intensity in armed conflicts. Straight's long-term work in northern Kenya includes extensive and intensive research on cultural practices and attitudes surrounding death, and two multi-year projects on collective violence, distress, and embodied trauma. Pike's long-term work in northern Kenya and in Tanzania includes multi-year projects on collective violence and trauma, and methodologies for quantifying and qualitatively describing distress.

While our eye-witness experiences and intensive ethnographic work (and friendships) with members of these communities suggested important consequences of collective violence in East African pastoralist communities, we viewed a baseline set of data to document these consequences as essential. Importantly, we designed our project to compare the three groups that engage in intercommunity violence at the intersections of our field sites. These violent encounters initiated community specific strategies, each of which appeared to come with a specific set of risks and trade-offs. For example, Turkana households were herding livestock in large, collective groups that generated concerns for environmental sustainability (Pike

2004) and Samburu families engaged in this strategy in the Samburu highlands while alternating this with increased mobility in the lowlands.

The emotional toll of transformed subsistence strategies and life on the run made it imperative that we include an assessment of emotional well-being and find a way to document distress. The Self-Report Questionnaire (SRQ-20) was one of the instruments we employed for evaluating distress in these communities. The SRQ-20 is a mental health-screening tool validated by the World Health Organization for cross-cultural use, which consists of 20 yes/no questions. Before employing the instrument, we engaged in a rigorous process of translation, back translation, discussion, and additional translation with thirteen Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana research assistants. As a result, our use of the instrument was overall fruitful, and indeed, our SRQ data provided valuable information concerning the toll that intercommunity violence takes in relation to poverty (Pike and Straight 2012; Pike, et al. 2010; Straight et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, and unexpectedly, a single question on the SRQ posed such a challenge to many of our respondents that either they qualified their responses or they refused to answer entirely. That question asked whether they had considered taking their own life over the course of the past month. On the one hand, we understood qualified responses ("I can't take my own life because I have children…") and refusals as powerful qualitative indicators of despair. At the same time, Straight's previous work on death and the contextualized experiences of all of this paper's authors in working in these communities suggested to us that strong cultural taboos surrounding 'physical' and 'social' death were at work here. This relates to one of our key arguments in this paper that, in the case of such troubling and sensitive concerns as suicide, anthropologists should practice deep engagement with communities. Without this engagement, key aspects of belief may be missed. Without deep engagement—the negative, qualified, and refused responses to the suicide ideation question could have been misconstrued or elided. Instead, we sought to build upon what we knew and contextualize these reactions to the question further. Thus, we conducted a follow-up set of intensive structured interview questions and informal conversations on the issue of suicide in these communities during our next set of qualitative interviews, in the summer of 2010.

These interviews and conversations, together with our previous research, yielded an integrative perspective of suicide as inseparable from the social fabric in which it occurs. And yet, suicide is a particularly challenging aspect of sociality. Like death generally, suicide disrupts social life, demanding a departure from the ordinary—a round of obligations between the living, and a way of separating, continuing, or renewing a relationship with the person who has taken their own life. These twin aspects of suicide—as fully integrated with sociality and yet disruptive and demanding—inform our observations concerning suicide in the three East African pastoralist communities on which we report in this paper.

Ultimately, our cultural contextualizing of the suicide ideation question suggested that our respondents' refusals to answer were at least partly rooted in the powerful consequences associated with even an attempt to take one's life. Notably with respect to its relational aspects (see Staples and Widger 2012), suicide in these communities is perceived as an affront to the living: For the person who

completes suicide, there are no consequences post-death but rather, consequences accrue to those left behind, including those who attempt but do not complete suicide.[1] At the same time, reports about the changing nature of suicide in some of our research sites call for a pragmatic stance aimed at reducing the rate of suicide in these communities.

In what follows, we will briefly examine previous theoretical perspectives on suicide, including Durkheim's. We limit our discussion of Durkheim, however, because, while classic, his approach does not adequately capture the deeply engaged qualitative-framework-building we advocate. Moreover, Durkheim's macro-level observations were predicated on a Eurocentric view of death and suicide that we would like to destabilize. To the extent that trends or patterns exist, these must be questioned and scrutinized, not assumed. We highlight a long-standing tension in anthropology in this respect, between the practicality of comparison and the dangers of flattening, eliding, and forgetting our own cultural and intellectual biases.

Next, we will offer several sections outlining the background and methods of our larger study as it pertains to suicide, and we will position suicide within the larger cultural framework we advocate. Finally, we discuss aspects of suicide that are changing in the communities within which we work, pointing to their implications for further consideration and study.

Suicide as Anthropological Object

Over a century ago, Durkheim (1897) framed a sociological approach to suicide that has, in one way or another, influenced every cross-cultural study of suicide since. Durkheim took a macroscopic view that treated suicide like other social facts. Thus, comparisons of suicide rates within and between communities offered descriptive information on the relative integration of the social group and of the individual in relation to the social group. Consistent with this orientation, he offered four types of suicide: egoistic, which he related to low levels of societal integration; altruistic, in which, due to high rates of societal integration, suicide only occurs as sacrifice on behalf of the social group (as in soldiers/warriors); anomic, occurring during times of tremendous social upheaval; and fatalistic, which Durkheim related to situations of such extreme oppression that they lead to absolute despair.

While a number of Durkheim's predictions and assessments of suicide have proven inaccurate or have been debated (La Fontaine 2012), Durkheim's lasting impact on suicide studies stems from his success in treating suicide as any other 'social fact.' That is, as with other social facts, Durkheim took suicide to reflect processes external to individuals and which transcended them; he deliberately

[1] Our concern in this paper surrounds the taboos that create barriers to documenting and investigating suicide's prevalence in these communities. We highlight the context of violence and the traumas associated with it as potentially increasing the likelihood of suicide ideation and potentially, completed suicides. At the same time, we note Doka's (1989) path-breaking sociological work on disenfranchised grief. In Doka's model, certain contextual factors, including circumstances of death (such as suicide), may truncate or preclude acceptable grieving. In the case we present here, unacceptable grieving may exacerbate the trauma experienced by those losing loved ones to completed suicides.

avoided the problem of individual motivation by examining what can be deduced from the act (the person takes action knowing that it will lead to death); and he presumed that differences between social groups and within social groups over time would result in macro-level, analyzable trends. With respect to the latter, while we might question Durkheim's particular interpretations, researchers continue to attribute analytic significance to differing rates of suicide. Again, however, we would like to highlight the possibility that a theoretical approach built upon quantifiable rates already assumes that statistical trends hold the same validity for our varying interlocutors or, at the least, that these rates yield one important aspect of a human experience that is practiced and understood quite distinctly in different cultural and social contexts. That is, as important as it is to document suicide rates and trends for broad humanitarian translation work, it is equally important to take into account our interlocutors' values, goals, and cultural understandings. Thus, we comment on the salient theoretical dimensions of quantitative approaches, while our own findings substantiate the importance of a broader cultural framework to inform documentation and dialogically contribute to community-driven intervention.

Anthropologists writing after Durkheim typically accepted Durkheim's basic framework, and offered cross-cultural examples to elucidate it further. However, by the 1940s, anthropologists had enlarged upon Durkheim's types with the addition of numerous cases where suicide or attempted suicide served as a social sanction—often a form of revenge (Jeffreys 1952; Bronislaw 1949).[2] Thus, anthropologists continued to address suicide throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, although only in sporadic individual papers until the publication of Bohannan's (1960) classic edited volume on homicide and suicide in Africa. Like their predecessors, the contributors to Bohannan's volume remained faithful to Durkheim's approach—they elucidated patterns while avoiding the difficulty of examining individual motivations, and they offered suicide rates in order to follow Durkheim's lead in analyzing trends. Thus, the authors noted differences by gender, age, and relatedness for example. Unfortunately, the statistics they offered were, for the most part, unreliable (La Fontaine 2012). With respect to the literature on suicide in Africa, Bohannan's volume was not unique in this respect: The authors' attempts to describe statistical trends were a step in the right direction for scholars committed to quantitatively documenting suicide, albeit performed with insufficient longitudinal quantitative data.

Indeed, the long-standing near-absence of reliable statistics on suicide in Africa is an issue of both practical and theoretical significance. Vaughn (2012) has recently argued that a combination of absent or unreliable statistics and racist assumptions concerning the 'African mind' combined to support arguments that suicide rates in Africa were uniformly lower than in industrialized regions. As she notes, it continues to be impossible to examine historical trends with the notable exception of parts of southern Africa (Vaughn 2010, 2012). On the other hand, Vaughn (2012) notes a rise in interest, even panic, within eastern and southern Africa concerning increased suicide rates that are attributed to contemporary social problems. While it is difficult to say whether panic is warranted, there is a clear need

[2] Also see Giddens (1964) for a synthesis of the literature spanning the 1930s–1960s.

for systematic collection of statistical data on suicide in Africa—and mortality generally, especially in rural areas. Anthropologists are well positioned to offer the contextual basis for doing so in respectful, rapport-driven ways.

We note four, sometimes overlapping cross-cultural approaches to suicide over the past decade, each of which treats suicide as a social fact: (1) ethnographic approaches that take note of attributed causes, methods, and consequences of suicide in a specific cultural context from our interlocutors' points of view (Brown 1986; Kral 2012; Staples and Widger 2012; Vaughn 2012); (2) psychological approaches that seek to understand the individual motivations for suicide within Western societies or in broad, comparative context (Kinyanda 2011a, b; Ndetei 2009); (3) approaches that highlight changing rates of suicide in a country or a subset of a population (e.g., increased rates of suicide among young men)(Else et al. 2007; Hunter and Milroy 2006; Kral 2012; Niehaus 2012; Vaughn 2010); and (4) action-oriented approaches that treat suicide as a public health dilemma in need of resolution (Kinyanda 2011a, b; Konradsen et al. 2006; Kral 2012; Ndetei 2009; Widger 2012). We follow the first approach in this paper while calling for the need for more work that would address the third and fourth approaches in fruitful relation to the ethnographic and psychological approaches.

In formulating our approach, we highlight the recent Special Issue on suicide in *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* edited by Staples and Widger (2012). These authors continue Durkheim's lead in establishing suicide as a social fact, but they do so in ways consistent with a half-century of increasing commitment to understanding not only humans as a changing species, but the human condition. Staples and Widger identify suicide as a "common human problem":

> At the center of this is the understanding of suicide as a kind of social relationship in its own right—as a vehicle by which people do not simply threaten or end their own lives but come to understand their own lives, and the world around them. There is, we argue, something highly empathetic (in the sense that it relates to people's emotional relationships with others) as well as emphatic about suicide, and in this volume, we propose that suicide should not simply be understood as a destructive act, but as a constitutive one as well (Staples and Widger 2012, p.186).

We embrace the spirit of this theoretical assessment, particularly its constitutive dimensions, with the caveat that our experiences make us hesitant to treat suicide apart from death more broadly. This is because at least some portion of the power suicide holds for those who would perform it is that, like death generally, suicide accomplishes a terrifying breach of the social contract. It simultaneously creates an absent interlocutor, and demands a dramatic transformation of personhood (Straight 2010). Identifying the sort of transformations death entails in any given cultural context is necessary to understanding to what extent suicide may indeed represent its own social form. This is not merely an intellectual thought problem: Failure to take account of suicide's positioning within a broader cultural framework risks misguided outsider interventions and wrong footing in dialogical encounters with communities.

Ethnographic Context: Communities in Conflict

Our research focuses on Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana pastoralist communities in north-central Kenya who have experienced periods of chronic conflict with one another, particularly over the past decade. Although they do not share a language, each of these three communities shares aspects of their pastoralist livelihoods and some cultural patterns in common (Broch-Due 1999b). In Durkheim and Mauss' terms, they belong to a single civilization—cultures on the move (Durkheim et al. 1998 [1913]; Mauss 1998 [1929]). All three groups share overlapping oral traditions that mutually refer to one another's historic migrations across the landscape (Schlee 2008; Sobania 1993; Straight, et al. Forthcoming). For example, Turkana and Samburu each have lineage histories linking Samburu and Turkana families through deliberate intermarriage, adoption, or war-related abductions. Pokot and Samburu agree that their two communities share a peace covenant dating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that can cause death for those who violate it. Unfortunately, these aspects of shared cultural and historical tradition have not prevented the exacerbation of violence over the last two decades.

While laying most of the blame on one another, the Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana tend to cite similar reasons for the conflicts between them. Thus, Pokot and Samburu blame the conflict on complicated and evolving disagreements over land and land use. In recent land disagreements between the Pokot and Samburu, the Samburu argue that the Pokot are actually attempting to expand their territory. The latter claim is difficult to wholly refute given that Pokot have been, by all accounts including their own, the most aggressive in conflicts, and in the 1990s, they succeeded in taking land that had legally belonged to Turkana [see Oesterle (2007) on the territorial expansion of Pokot in recent years; see also Greiner (2012, 2013) on factors affecting Pokot conflicts with their neighboring groups]. Thus, turning to the conflict between Turkana and Pokot, the Pokot have already succeeded in expanding into Turkana and continue to steal Turkana livestock. The conflict between Turkana and Samburu, which both sides cite as over pasture, water, and political representation, is less serious but nonetheless important, particularly as it results in fatalities, forced flights, and livestock losses.

The issue of political representation is a key contemporary feature of this violent triangle. While it is possible to point to some of the individual reasons for particular conflicts, all of the violence in northern Kenya must necessarily be situated more broadly in historical and contemporary political realities that have marginalized, underdeveloped, and impoverished all of these communities. Moreover, in recent decades, political elites vying for constituency support have both unintentionally and too often deliberately exacerbated intercommunity conflicts in several ways. Political office represents the promise of increased resources, which can cause tensions between ethnic communities who view themselves as competing for access through the election of their candidate. In some cases, political candidates may attempt to control the election process by using conflicts to push opponents' constituencies out of a voting area. Indeed, in late 2006, ahead of the 2007 Kenya

elections, 3,000 Samburu and their 50,000[3] cattle were evicted from their homes through government-sponsored moves that looked suspiciously like pre-election tactics (Straight 2009). In 2005, Pokot carried out a series of raids against IlChamus at Lake Baringo when IlChamus intended to claim their own constituency from the Electoral Commission of Kenya. On this occasion, IlChamus wanted to fix a demarcation line between their territory and East Pokot which is not accepted by the Pokot as such (Oesterle 2007). Additionally, some political candidates have financed their campaigns with sales of stolen livestock (Pkalya et al. 2003).

While the causes of conflict are multiple and complex, a post-colonial legacy of circumscribed access to land, including dry season pasture; related political factors, including the establishment of conservancies that create unequal access to land and election-related political manipulation; and environmental pressures, including one of the worst droughts on record in 2008–2009 all combine to create or exacerbate tensions (Bollig et al. 2013, 2008; Broch-Due 2000; Greiner 2012, 2013; Lesorogol 2008; Oesterle 2007; Pike, et al. 2010; Straight 2009). The constraints on access to pasture and the incumbent loss of livestock associated with the raiding have altered herding strategies, threatened food security, and have been identified as major drivers of the transformation of pastoralism in the region (Oesterle 2008a). The combination of limited mobility, poor access to foraged foods, fear of raids, and noteworthy livestock losses also conspires to create considerable suffering and stress in pastoralist communities.

Managing Distress in the Context of Intercommunity Conflict

How do individuals cope with stress in the face of frequent violent attack? What are their primary concerns? For pastoralists, livestock are important measures of identity and self-worth so that loss of livestock can be usefully compared to job loss, home foreclosure, and homelessness in the United States. Herds offer a means to feed one's family, powerful healing properties when children are unwell, and serve as strength-giving sustenance for recovering from childbirth. Herds also serve as a potent sense of identity. Talented, successful herding families are highly regarded and have strong social networks. Such reciprocal relationships are the cornerstone of resilience for herding families. Thus, to lose one's herd triggers a loss of identity, removes important buffers to hunger and good health, and erodes pastoralist families' sense of social belonging.

Individuals in all of the sample sites engage in livestock trade and resourceful alternatives to raise money for food purchases. Small stock are frequently sold specifically to purchase flour and other staples, as well as to pay for health costs and school expenses. While men manage livestock sales and trade to fulfill these needs, women typically engage in petty hawking or beer brewing. For Pokot and Turkana, chickens have become a prevalent source of food, and many individuals sell eggs. Samburu have extensive food taboos, but particularly in highland communities

[3] Three thousand herders and 50,000 cattle are the figures reported in The Daily Nation by Moses Mwathi and Gakuu Mathenge (Daily Nation, November 27, 2007, "Eviction of Herders Winds Up").

where our sites are located, chickens have been experiencing some popularity. Making and selling charcoal is a common last resort and an indicator of high poverty.

For the many families in our sample communities, life is always lived at the edge, and the evidence of this fact is reflected in Kenya's low life expectancy and high rates of infant mortality—120 out of 1,000 live births in 2004 (World Health Organization Fact Sheet 2006). Compare this to 7.6 out of 1,000 live births in the United States (World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2007). With respect to mental health, the World Health Organization notes that mental health data are unavailable for Kenya, the suicide rate is likewise unavailable, a mental health policy does not exist, and—in contrast to 7.79 psychiatrists available per 100,000 individuals in the United States, in Kenya, the figure is .19 psychiatrist per 100,000 (World Health Organization Mental Health Atlas 2011).

When poverty is exacerbated by violence, families have greater difficulty accessing health services and lose access to customary resources. Even the daily economic activities of getting water and firewood are disrupted. As one Samburu at the conflict zone described it, "When passing to get water, we fear because of these fights, we fear because of these enemies. When we go to water or firewood…we fear these enemies, the Pokot" (Konk Lek interview, 2009). Moreover, increased uncertainty and higher population densities due to displacement increase petty theft, as the above quoted respondent also explained "We fear also those people who attack people on the path, taking flour from people and they take money from people" (same interview).

The impact of daily violent attacks can be overwhelming, affecting all aspects of daily existence. Thus, Samburu and Turkana living in the conflict zone describe bad dreams, daily fears of where to find food, being attacked on the road, and losing additional people and livestock. Another Samburu respondent described it this way:

> Some livestock got lost and others were killed, and we take care of what has remained, and all of the animals we could not move, we left behind…When we hear the enemies have attacked somewhere, you start feeling unwell before they attack you, because your body senses it, your body is not good. So the malaria can attack you seriously because of the fear…When you dream, you dream bad things. You no longer dream about good things. You just dream about bad things, because of these fights every day, hearing that so and so has been killed, so and so has died. So that is the thing you will dream about (Fu Lepa interview 2009).

Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana all express fears about family members dying and about being able to provide food, and all recognize that food insecurity is related to poor health. For pastoralists, the health of livestock is directly relevant to the health of people, and a daily balance must be struck between, for example, providing enough milk for the family and leaving enough milk for calves and goat or sheep kids. In the face of violent attack, animals are moved if they are healthy enough to survive the journey, but as one respondent indicated, after seven forced moves, the numbers of surviving livestock and people decline. So and so had died. So and so had been killed.

Yet people must persevere, and they do. As the respondent quoted at length above asserted, "we take care of what has remained." The responsibility of taking care of what has remained leads us to one of the most poignant revelations in our research as evidenced by the refusal of many of our respondents to answer the suicide ideation question on the SRQ-20, while some of our Turkana respondents explained explicitly why they could not do so. For Samburu, for whom the taboo on suicide is possibly the strongest of all three communities, it is suggestive that these individuals could not answer, even as 89.41 % of them answered yes to at least 7 other questions and 25 % of them answered yes to 13 or more questions. If yes is the worst thing to say, then silence is the only response.

Methods: The SRQ

As described in this paper's Introduction, we implemented a collaborative project aimed at documenting the physical and emotional costs of these conflicts for individuals, families, and communities. Our research team has extensive experience in these communities—two decades for Straight and Pike. Hilton has worked in the region since 2006, and Oesterle had completed 18 months of Ph.D. research prior to beginning our project. Our research was approved by the Human Subjects Review Boards at University of Arizona and Western Michigan University, and we were granted permits to conduct our study by the Kenyan Ministry of Education.

Our sample consisted of approximately thirty households in six sites, with two sites in each of the three ethnic communities. In each community—Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana—we selected one site as being most directly affected by violent conflict (highly affected site—HAS), and a relative control site that was as insulated from conflict as is realistic to find (less affected site—LAS). The Pokot and Samburu control sites had not experienced direct conflict for decades, although a few Samburu families had kin who herded livestock near conflict zones. The Turkana control site had not experienced direct conflict for the past decade at the start of research, but some violent incidents occurred during the study period.

Our approach, ethnographically driven epidemiology (Pike, et al. 2010), demanded iterative feedback that allowed us to follow the more quantitative findings with ethnographic interviews. Similar to the challenges described by Beals, et al. (2003), the need to find culturally relevant and sensitive tools to document distress often leads anthropologists to narrative approaches (e.g., Coker 2004; Zarowski 2000 as lovely examples), yet such choices can make it difficult to place the experiences of distress in a broader comparative framework. Beals, et al. (2003) suggest that by focusing on a culturally specific approach, we miss the opportunity to place marginalized communities in a position to be compared to the more often counted groups in a nation-state. As such, we may inadvertently leave them out of policy decisions and national resources to address mental health. Mindful of such omissions and based on the challenges Pike encountered in her efforts to document distress with three different pastoralist/agro-pastoralist communities, we were intent on finding meaningful ways to document distress among the Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana communities.

In addition to in-depth, ethnographic interviews and informal conversations enhanced by years of deeply engaged participant-observation, we selected the Self-Report Questionnaire (SRQ-20), developed and widely validated by the World Health Organization (Beusenberg and Orley 1994) to screen for emotional distress, the administration of which led to the writing of this paper. The SRQ-20 consists of 20 yes–no questions that were designed to define cases of anxiety and depression (Table 1). After encountering reliability and validity issues with likert-style mental health instruments among Datoga pastoralists of Tanzania (Pike and Patil 2004), the SRQ-20 was chosen because the yes/no responses are more reliable in low-literacy communities. In addition, the questionnaire contains a mix of physical and emotional symptoms that we knew were salient in pastoralist communities (Pike and Williams 2006). Our goal in using the SRQ-20 was to document variation in distress levels and as a general measure of psychosocial well-being rather than diagnosing clinical cases of anxiety and/or depression. As such, it provided valuable documentation of the patterns of distress across the six field sites. (For methodological studies and case studies relevant to our use of the SRQ-20, see Beusenberg and Orley 1994; Rahman and Hafeez 2003; Rahman, et al. 2005).

Based on our previous experiences, we chose to spend considerable time ensuring our translations of the SRQ-20 captured valid cross-cultural experiences and were comparable across the three language groups. Our first step included several days of verbal discussion among multilingual research assistants who belong to the study communities—gender-balanced teams of four Turkana, four Samburu, and four Pokot, and a Samburu team coordinator. The questions were translated, back-translated, and then translated and back-translated again following extended discussions of culturally specific idioms and metaphors. All teams underwent two separate training periods together before conducting the SRQ-20 in the study communities.

The overwhelming majority of our respondents voluntarily completed the SRQ overall and did not ask to stop the survey, yet many Pokot respondents and almost all Samburu respondents refused to answer the suicide ideation question, which asked, “Has the thought of ending your life been on your mind?” A higher percentage of Turkana respondents agreed to answer the question—sometimes giving a positive response. Several of the Turkana who offered a negative response, however, qualified their answer by saying that they had children to care for, and thus could not take their own life. As Sarah Brabant expresses in relation to disenfranchised grieving (see Doka 1989, 2002), “If the person’s emotional response is in conflict with group norms, he or she can refuse to comply with the group norms; he or she cannot choose to do away with them” (Brabant 2002, p. 34). In this case, Turkana respondents might be experiencing suicide ideation but cultural norms prevent them from admitting this and thus from seeking help.

We analyze our SRQ-20 results in detail in parallel papers. Most relevant to our purposes in this paper, we share the mean positive responses for respondents who answered yes to 7 or more SRQ questions (a cutoff signaling significant distress) compared to the mean positive responses to question number thirteen: “Has the thought of ending your life been on your mind?” Most notable with respect to Samburu fears concerning even the contemplation of suicide is the fact that while

Table 1 Comparative summary of high positive response to the self-report questionnaire (SRQ-20) and positive responses to the suicidal ideation question by field site

Site	*N*	Number of respondents answering 7 + SRQ questions positively	Number of respondents answering suicide question positively	Percent of respondents answering 7 + SRQ questions positively	Percent of respondents answering suicide question positively
Turkana LAS	145	67	18	46.21	12.41
Turkana HAS	129	52	13	40.31	10.08
Pokot LAS	45	9	5	20.00	11.11
Pokot HAS	63	14	1	22.22	01.58
Samburu LAS	90	12	1	13.33	01.11
Samburu HAS	85	76	4	89.41	05.26

89.41 % of respondents in the Samburu highly affected site (HAS) answered yes to 7 or more questions, only 5 % answered the suicide ideation question positively.

Suicide in East African Pastoralist Communities

We contend that, even as suicide belongs to social relationships, it is fundamentally entwined with the transformations of personhood associated with death more broadly. As Straight has said elsewhere, "The destruction of human life at once redefines personhood through its destruction or reorientation, forces metaphysical contemplation in ways that typically open a window onto the sacred, and reproduces the social order through a loss that challenges its integrity" (Straight 2010, p.128).

While suicide poses unique dilemmas with respect to the 'soul,' the 'corpse,' and the mourners (Hertz 1960 [1907]), these dilemmas can best be understood in relation to the challenges all deaths pose to a community. Our choice to examine suicide as a special form of death rather than as a unique form of sociality—as Staples and Widger (2012) suggest—is in order to precisely distinguish those aspects of death-related practices that are indeed qualitatively unique to suicide in a given community in contrast to the ways that suicide merely 'turns up the volume,' making it a more highly charged death.

Death in all three societies has contagious aspects, which must be controlled through acts that ritually cleanse and separate. Cleansing is performed by smearing goat's blood and/or stomach contents on the gathered mourners or—minimally—on those who come into contact with the corpse. (Some sort of payment is also typically given to the men who prepare the corpse.) Separation is accomplished in several ways and over a period that may extend over a year. Immediate kin or those considered part of the 'hair sharing' group shave their heads or—as in the case of Turkana and Pokot men—their foreheads. Our Pokot respondents remarked that this is a terrible act and thus one of the unpleasant acts associated with mourning. Additionally, the settlement is moved usually after a month, and in the case of Turkana elders, it may be moved several times. For all three societies, the deceased's name is no longer spoken. At a pragmatic and emotional level, each act of separation helps with the process of grieving, while also accomplishing what Samburu refer to as 'cutting' death from the living. The failure to cleanse and separate can literally invite the deaths of additional individuals, whether because of actual contact with the deceased that is not cleansed or because of a failure to separate from those one was intimately connected to in life (Barrett 1987; Broch-Due 1999a; Schneider 1953; Soper 1985; Spencer 1965; Straight 2007).

As in most cases cross-culturally, not all deaths are treated as equal. Samburu, Turkana, and Pokot practice 'exposure' for the corpses of older children and childless adults, and these are typically very difficult deaths emotionally. Samburu, for example, gather up the belongings of people in this category to dispose of in a running body of water or otherwise far removed from human habitation—in this way effecting as total an erasure of personhood as possible (Straight 2007). Pokot believe that childless persons vanish totally. Without children, there is no relation with the living anymore and there is nobody whom they could visit as a spirit later

on. Other Kalenjin groups share this belief with the Pokot. Exposure entails placing the corpse under a tree, with mortuary rites performed there. In cases of warriors or of individuals dying in inauspicious ways (such as being trampled by wild animals away from home), the person may be left where they died. Where proximity to administrative centers or population density has made these practices impractical, Christian burial sometimes offers an alternative (Straight 2007 on Samburu and see Oesterle 2008b for a detailed discussion of Christianity and Christianization in East Pokot).

In contrast to these inauspicious and emotionally charged deaths that may require utter erasure of personhood, older men and women with descendants are the 'sweet' dead, who may undergo de-individuation on the way to ancestral status but not annihilation. These men and women are buried within or adjacent to the settlement. Pokot bury women outside the homestead and leave their houses to decay while men are buried in the middle of the goats' or cows' enclosure. The animals will be shifted to a different place afterwards. The sons are responsible for the burial of their parents. Broch-Due (Broch-Due 1999b, p. 73) reports that Turkana allow goats to trample the graves of elder men, a respectful practice that "anonymizes the individuality of the person and returns him to the diffuse class of ancestral spirits." In all three communities, gifts of tobacco, milk, and—if ancestral anger is suspected—sacrificed livestock are offered on the gravesite for as long as there are living descendants who remember the grave.

In examining suicide within these East African pastoralist communities, it is important to distinguish between the ritual cleansing and separation that must occur with any death, and actions and attitudes particular to suicide. For the Pokot, Samburu, and Turkana, suicide impinges on two highly charged domains of death—murder and serious forms of mental illness (the latter experienced as social death).[4] Both are often attributed to curses, malicious acts by 'remote control' (e.g., 'witchcraft'), or to suicide, murder, or other wrongdoing performed by one's parents or other ancestors. Thus, when suicide occurs, relatives and community members speculate or actively seek the causal explanation and are particularly vigilant with respect to acts of cleansing.

Following our arguments in this paper, we note 'remote control' and other unpropitious forms of causation specifically to highlight the ways their significance is consistent within a broader cultural logic—placing suicide in the realm of other unpropitious acts and forms of death that must be ritually cleansed.[5] We relate this further to the fact that *attempted* suicide can have implications equal to completed suicide. For example, one of our Samburu respondents related the story of a woman who attempted suicide by hanging but her sister cut her down in time. *N'goki* [the most extreme Samburu unpropitious substance/state (Straight 2007)][6] became a consequence for both women and also the Turkana man who married one of them. Thus, in order to emphasize to us the consequences he and other community

[4] The issue of HIV/AIDS was mentioned as a consideration for ending one's life.

[5] Oesterle notes, for example, witnessing a ritual cleansing process in connection with adultery. The case was highly dramatic and—although not directly mentioned—HIV/AIDS was a major factor.

[6] Schneider (1953) mentions Pokot wrongdoing as *ngoku*.

members attribute to the woman's attempted suicide, our Samburu respondent pointed out that the Turkana husband was responsible for inciting political violence that led to many deaths and then he himself died prematurely. As heritable unpropitiousness, n'goki 'attaches' itself to murderers, those who attempt suicide, and those who commit other egregious acts of wrongdoing. As contagious unpropitiousness, without successful cleansing, it spreads to those who come into contact with individuals who commit these acts (Straight 2007).

For these pastoralists, suicide is a form of wrongdoing committed, not in any simple sense against the self, but rather, against the living. Consistent with Staples and Widger's (2012) assertion, suicide is relational. Our respondents were unequivocal that nothing 'follows' the person who completes suicide. As one Samburu respondent stated emphatically, those persons "kill themselves in peace." Rather, and if we follow the logic of cleansing and the consequences of its failure, suicide shares its source with other terrible events that defy understanding. While cleansing must occur for all deaths, the strenuousness of the cleansing of those who come into contact with it is a matter of degree. The least risk is with old people dying a natural death, while the highest risk is associated with violent deaths, young deaths, and both completed and uncompleted suicides. Whether discussed in the idiom of mental health of individuals and entire families (for murder and suicide) or human disease (for young, preventable deaths), these *deaths*, and not the persons dying from them, are forms of contagion that stick to living human beings, objects, and natural things.

In this respect, respondents shared a number of possible reasons persons might kill themselves, and yet a common comment was that no one can know what is 'inside' another person.[7] Thus, against the common individual explanations of poverty, spousal infidelity, and spousal abuse, some respondents noted with some vehemence that many people lose wealth or have interpersonal difficulties but yet they persevere. Others were more compassionate, but expressed a similar conclusion: Sometimes the apparent cause is visible and sometimes it is not, but no one ever really knows—something is 'wrong' there, in the unpropitious sense. That is, suicide is not an individualized, medical phenomenon for these communities. Rather, it is always an act that highlights inter-subjectivity understood through propitious and unpropitious acts and states of being that bind persons at a particular moment and across generations.

Suicide Methods: Transformative Implications for Gender and Personified Objects

Most respondents spontaneously discussed methods when asked about suicide, which is not surprising, since how a person chooses to end their life creates poignant obligations for the living. This led all of our Samburu respondents to discuss the increasing prevalence of pesticides as a method, and its implications for gendered differentiation of both methods and rates. Many respondents reported a perception

[7] On cultural scripts of suicide, see Counts (1991).

that suicide is on the rise—similar to perceptions elsewhere in eastern Africa (Vaughn 2012). Yet, while global, regional, and community statistics uniformly report a higher incidence of suicide among men, particularly young men, our respondents' perceptions suggest the possibility of different gender trends in these communities. In this section, we will discuss our respondents' perceptions of trends, following a detailed ethnographic description of suicide methods and their implications for ritual cleansing and treatment of those who contemplate, attempt, and/or complete suicide.

As with murder, suicide carries instant contagion, which has typically posed particular challenges in suicide's aftermath. Before the widespread availability of pesticides, the common method for suicide in all three communities was hanging from a tree by rope, although Turkana respondents indicated men might choose to fall on a spear. Cutting the throat was also mentioned, though perceived as less common. Because of the association between breath and divinely given spirit in these pastoralist communities, these methods add an additional layer of unspeakable horror to the action. Our Pokot, Samburu, and some of the Turkana respondents spent time discussing the unpropitious implications of hanging for both the tree and the rope, both of which must be ritually cleansed with a goat's blood and/or stomach contents. An important difference between Samburu and Pokot on this point is that Samburu cleanse the tree but do not cut it down because the tree is so closely associated with ancestral substance. This animated aspect of the tree is entangled with its 'obligations'—to provide shade to children, women, and the old. The dead are also placed there, and trees grow spontaneously from graves. In contrast, several Pokot respondents said that the tree is first prayed to, then cut down, chopped into pieces, and burned so that mourners will not have to look at it. In an interview with a Turkana woman, the cleansing implications of a suicide were discussed with thoughtful concern for both the deceased and the special tree used for hanging. As a tree under which a placenta had been buried and as the namesake of a small child, this tree was a source of nurturing. She openly expressed the distress associated with the need to cleanse this tree from violent death when it has been such a powerful symbol of life.

The problems of contagion extend to the rope that holds the deceased also, and thus, it is difficult for anyone to contemplate cutting the rope so that the corpse can drop to the ground and have mortuary rites performed. Samburu reported that they typically find a Samburu of already stigmatized status, or else an outsider such as a Turkana, to cut the rope. Several Samburu respondents also reported that the fear of contagion is so strong that people may even fear cutting the rope to save the life of a still-living person. This is where emotional, lived experience overcomes 'rules'—as in the case of the woman described in the previous section who cut the rope to save her sister's life. Pokot respondents were likewise very emotive, and expressed how personally wrenching it was to have to cut that rope from which one's deceased loved one was hanging. Several respondents in these communities implied that—historically at least—the corpse of a childless person might be left where they were, and the area avoided.

Respondents spontaneously discussed suicide methods in response to our questions concerning the rituals that must be performed in the context of complete

or incomplete suicides. Additionally, however, they raised the issue of methods when asked if they perceived differences in the frequency and reasons of men's versus women's suicides. Pokot respondents were equivocal, with some arguing for equal numbers while others argued that either women or men committed the act in greater numbers. Samburu respondents perceived an increase in the rates for women even if they believed that men's suicides currently equaled or exceeded those of women.[8] Importantly, Samburu attributed the increase in women's suicides to a change in method—pesticides used to protect animals and humans (e.g., for ticks, fleas, and bedbugs).[9] The Samburu asserted that before the widespread availability of this type of poison, men were more likely to commit suicide. (These claims are contradicted by cases of Samburu women hanging themselves within the last decade.) Indeed, some Samburu were emphatic that before the availability of pesticides, women would never commit suicide for two reasons: They are directly responsible for caring for their children, and they have the option of running away from their homes if things get bad. A man, in contrast, cannot 'run away' because he is directly responsible for his entire lineage, not just the daily care of his immediate children.[10] Turkana talked about the multitude of reasons for why women might commit suicide and uniformly indicated hanging and poison were women's methods of choice but they also indicated they thought men might commit suicide more frequently.

All of these perceptions highlight the need to collect reliable longitudinal mortality and suicide data even where it is most challenging, as in these communities in which all death—particularly murder and suicide—is so taboo that many people are reluctant or refuse to disclose information about their own families. In the absence of such data, it is impossible to confirm whether pastoralist women's suicides equal men's in some communities and whether they may even be on the rise in others.

A notable consequence of poison as a method, however, is that it has introduced a biomedical component that has not escaped our respondents' attention. Anecdotally at least, this has increased the number of individuals who are saved. This is because—in contrast to the instant contagion (and likelihood of death) associated with cutting one's throat or hanging by a rope—our respondents unanimously agreed that fast action is taken when poison is suspected. Loved ones are forced to vomit and rushed to clinics and hospitals. This suggests an ironic and complicated relationship between the mass availability of pesticides and understandings of suicide in these pastoralist communities. As in other cases of introduced technologies, both gender and cultural understandings are dynamic and

[8] On suicide and gender, including in relation to methods, see for example Brown (1986), Marecek (2012), Niehaus 2012, Widger 2012.

[9] See Konradsen et al. (2006) on the relationship between pesticides and suicides in Sri Lanka.

[10] There is a counter-intuitive dimension to the metaphysics relating to gender, however: Samburu say that a man who commits suicide 'kills his home' because n'goki only follows the descendants of men who commit suicide—in contrast to Pokot who said that the 'curse' follows the descendants of both men and women. This heritable aspect is distinct from the contagious aspect: For Samburu as with Pokot, the contagion of suicide can spread to those who come into direct contact with the deceased, regardless of the deceased's gender.

unpredictable. Pesticide availability might be having an unintended and tragic consequence of increasing suicide rates, particularly among women. At the same time, because pesticides are not symbolically loaded—as are long-standing methods such as hanging by rope, falling on a spear, or cutting one's throat—they are open to new cultural interpretations and practices. Indeed, our respondents view pesticides as inherently foreign, and thus appropriate for biomedical intervention.

Conclusion

Our main theoretical point in this paper has been that ethnographically nuanced studies reflecting deep engagement with communities are best positioned to form a basis for respectful collection of accurate longitudinal quantitative data on suicide, and community-driven, positively transformative interventions. Based on two decades of work with these pastoralist communities, we further argue that ethnographic analyses of suicide are more complete and descriptively accurate when suicide is examined with respect to death more broadly and/or other social phenomena by which specific cultural communities understand and respond to it. For the communities we examine in this paper, suicide is understood as a highly charged form of death similar in its unpropitious qualities to murder, severe forms of mental illness, and extreme forms of wrongdoing.

In keeping with our aims for that research, we would like to conclude by suggesting avenues for further research on this important issue, particularly in communities like those in which we work, where human services are lacking, literacy rates remain extremely low, and disease and distress burdens are high. Most importantly, we argue that cultural values—examined through ethnographic methods—are crucial not just for the sake of theory but also for pragmatic solutions to public health dilemmas. In our specific case, in bringing our previous research and additional investigations to bear on the issue of refusal to answer one of the SRQ-20 questions, we revealed that, in the case of such a highly charged form of death as suicide (or murder), merely affirming that one is considering it can have metaphysically hazardous consequences. Like the unspoken curse that escapes the stomach of an abandoned grandparent at death (Straight 2007), contemplation of suicide sets into motion, an already existing metaphysical condition caused by breaking a taboo. The metaphysical consequences of some taboos, particularly involving harm to others, can have heritable consequences. Additionally, our work revealed that pesticide availability is having unintended consequences that may include increasing incidences of suicide overall and for women particularly, and furthermore that this new method for a tragic human practice appears to permit positive intervention in ways that long-standing methods do not. We advocate more research on pesticide use in the context of suicide.

These findings point to the need for extensive rapport with communities and partnerships with community insiders for developing sensitive, but effective methodologies for documenting all forms of mortality. In the absence of deep engagement, the implications of certain cultural attitudes may be missed or go

unexplored, with consequences that may range from missed opportunities to significantly unfortunate errors during the process of charting interventions.

As with most public health concerns, future directions for reducing suicide rates and alleviating suffering associated with it will be most effective when done in full partnership with communities. As Kral (2012) has demonstrated with respect to the Inuit community he has reported on, the community was far more successful at curbing suicide rates than had been the case with external, governmental intervention. After government/outsider interventions were abysmal failures, Inuit developed strategies of their own consistent with their cultural values. They saw reduced rates of suicide and even broader positive outcomes, such as increased school attendance rates. Thus, anthropologists are at our best when ethnographically identifying key cultural values, quantitatively documenting consequences of physical and structural forms of violence, and engaging in truly participatory forms of intervention.

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