

CULTURAL VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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Attitudes toward death, like so many other aspects of a people's "world-view," are strongly influenced by dominant cultural themes. In this paper, we propose to analyze some of the cultural values that appear to affect American attitudes toward death, and to explore their social consequences. We shall also contrast American patterns with those of a Polynesian people, the Rotumans, among whom one of the authors has recently completed twenty-one months of field work.¹

In comparison with other attitudes such as prejudice, attitudes toward death have received little attention from social scientists in this country; yet few attitudes are more central to human motivation. Any satisfactory comprehension of human behavior requires a knowledge of the significance that people attribute to being alive; and to understand this requires a knowledge of their attitudes toward death. The paucity of systematic studies in this area reflects the morbidity with which the subject is regarded in our society. Nevertheless, a few highly significant studies have been made which should stimulate further research.

Previous studies have reported that the predominant attitude toward death in American society is one of dread. Such a disposition has been found to prevail in the population as a whole,² and in such subgroups as older persons,³ college students,⁴ adolescents,⁵ and physicians.⁶ But perhaps the most thoroughly studied group has been young children. Various studies have dealt with children's feelings about death,⁷ how they cope with the idea of death intellectually,⁸ the theories

they employ to explain it,⁹ the impact of their first experience of the death of another,¹⁰ and the effects of their own impending death upon their fantasies.¹¹ It should be noted in passing that this focus upon children's attitudes is not entirely rooted in their theoretical relevance, nor does it seem to stem solely from the intellectual curiosity of the investigators. Perhaps a more important factor is the ease with which the investigators are able to avoid identification with young subjects, thereby reducing the danger of their own self-involvement with the fact of death. Furthermore, children are less apt to communicate a sense of morbidity, and so are less threatening subjects than adults.

Additional studies have dealt with various other aspects of death. Among these are studies of bereavement and its social impact,¹² and of the sociological and cultural significance of funeral rites.¹³ Anthropologists have contributed some special studies on attitudes toward death in other cultures,¹⁴ while most standard ethnographies describe beliefs and rituals concerning death.

These studies provide an excellent basis for attempting to comprehend and explain the predominance in our society of a fearful attitude toward death. Some noteworthy progress has already been made toward illuminating the psychodynamics involved,¹⁵ but as yet the sociocultural determinants have gotten little attention. What little speculation there has been on those determinants has come either from general essayists,¹⁶ or from writers on philosophy,¹⁷ art,¹⁸ and literature.¹⁹ The purpose of the present paper is to sys-

tematically explore some of the links between dominant cultural themes and attitudes toward death, with a view toward stimulating further research.

There is a distinction between attitudes toward death and attitudes toward dying. Death is a state or condition into which every organism passes. It refers to the complete cessation of all vital functions of the organism. Dying, on the other hand, is a process, the process of life drawing to a close. Hence, dying usually involves the possibility of avoidance or delay, whereas death is final and inevitable.

The fear of dying seems to be universal. Philosophers and students of human behavior have long pointed out that self-preservation is a fundamental human motive, and some have even suggested that it is the most basic of all human motives. Every society regards human life as precious and takes precautions to preserve it. From time to time, under very special circumstances, other values may supersede the value of life itself—clan and kindred, honor, patriotism, self-glorification, etc.—the nature of these values varying from society to society. But in every society, individuals willingly give their lives only under extreme conditions. Nowhere is dying taken lightly, and to die for nothing is everywhere regarded as a great misfortune.

The fear of death, however, is not universal. Persons may also regard the state of death with acquiescence, friendly anticipation, or even fanatical hope. This fact is well documented in the studies of Bromberg and Schilder, who note that "the fear of actually dying is apparently uppermost. It seems that the act of dying more than being dead or death completely overrides the notion that the individual is removed from the land of the living. Most of the subjects stress the dislike of the dying process."²⁰ As Wahl notes, "death is itself not only a state, but a complex symbol, the significance of which will vary from one person to another and

from one culture to another, and is also profoundly dependent upon the nature of the vicissitudes of the developmental process."²¹ It is the cultural context of this developmental process that we shall explore here.

Three aspects of death are of special relevance to our discussion. First, death may be conceived of as a defeat of man by nature. Men everywhere have at their disposal a variety of cultural techniques—notably medicine, magic, and prayer—with which to challenge dying. But despite all men's efforts, death is the ultimate victor.

Second, death results in separation. Foremost is the physical separation of the deceased from friends and relatives, and from society in general; but also implied is a total cessation of social interaction between the deceased and his survivors. The degree to which this separation is dramatized differs from society to society, but it is usually expressed in the specific funeral custom.²² At one extreme are those societies which sanction the preservation of corpses or of relics from them, or which keep the corpse within the village and allow it to deteriorate slowly. Under such circumstances, the drama of separation is mitigated. At the other extreme are those societies in which corpses are destroyed with the greatest possible haste; in these societies, the physical separation, at least, is dramatic and abrupt. Cultural beliefs regarding the fate of souls may also affect the rapidity with which separation is experienced. Where tradition holds that the souls of the dead remain socially active for a period of time following death, one would expect separation to be experienced less abruptly than where souls are believed to depart directly from the social sphere, or not to exist at all.

Third, death is a state of inactivity. It is true, of course, that most people profess to believe in a life after death—a state in which the soul is active. Yet the very way in which this is usually stated—*life after death*—merely empha-

sizes the association of life with activity and death with inactivity. Regardless of beliefs concerning the soul, the quiescence of the physical organism after death is readily apparent and dramatizes the association of death with inactivity.

It is our basic thesis that the dread with which death is regarded in American culture can in part be explained as the result of a conflict between the aspects of death discussed above and basic American values.

AMERICAN VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

At the core of the American value system is the belief that man can master nature, a belief which has motivated the phenomenal technological progress that we now enjoy. The belief itself, however, has been nurtured by the fact that man has been able to gain a greater control over his environment than previous generations thought possible. Technological progress has enabled man to solve problems that previously had been regarded as unchangeable facts of life. Man has moved into an age in which it is not only hoped, but accepted as certainty, that with enough money, knowledge, and hours of work, it is possible to resolve any problem, surmount any obstacle, or change any part of nature.

One result of these beliefs is that most Americans do not really accept death as inevitable; they tend to feel invulnerable. As Wahl has noted, these beliefs are "puissant enough to enable the majority of mankind to remain relatively untroubled in the face of the vast array of factors which should convince them that death is the inevitable end of all men 'even themselves.'"²³ Thus our cultural conditioning makes us feel shocked at the realization of death's finality. In its presence we are forced to re-evaluate our belief system. In the words of Jung, "the question of the meaning and worth of life never be-

comes more urgent or more agonizing than when we see the final breath leave a body which a moment before was living."²⁴ In sum, death may be conceived of as a thwarting of man's struggle for ultimate supremacy; it hence constitutes a serious threat to his sense of mastery over nature. As such, it is a source of anxiety and fear.

In America, separation and isolation are also associated with death. To some extent, this is a consequence of two features of our sociocultural system. First, our modal funeral custom involves interment of the corpse in a closed box, which is hastily transported to the outskirts of a town or city and placed in a hole in the ground. The process of cremation is hardly a less dramatic form of separation. Second, since the network of interpersonal relations with significant others tends to be narrowly confined in our culture, death usually involves a certain measure of social isolation for the bereaved. To fully understand this association of death with social isolation, it is necessary to probe further into the significance of social isolation in America. As a general rule, the threat of social isolation generates considerable anxiety for Americans. This is implied in our system of social control, in which social isolation is second only to death in severity of punishment. Perhaps the most dramatic example of its effectiveness can be seen from its impact on prisoners of war.²⁵

There are several reasons why separation is threatening to persons in our society. One is that most individuals live within a tight security circle, relying upon only a few people for emotional gratification. This tends to produce intense, rather than diffuse affective relationships, rendering separation from only a few people a potentially critical emotional experience. The possibility of finding adequate substitutes for significant others is remote. As a consequence, the whole self-image of an individual is under maximum risk when he is faced with separation. A factor of even greater

consequence is the nature of the socialization process in America, particularly in the middle class, among whom social isolation, along with reasoning and "love-oriented" techniques, are dominant forms of discipline.²⁶ Moreover, many of our child-rearing practices result in periodically isolating the child from his main source of emotional security. He is often put in a separate room to sleep at an age when isolation and punishment may be synonymous in his mind.

It should also be noted that a number of crucial social experiences encountered by most children involve facing new and sometimes threatening experiences alone, without the presence of someone on whom they can rely for emotional support. The first days of school, being lost in a crowd, or spending time in a hospital are examples. Whatever other threats or dangers might be associated with these experiences, it is clear that the factor they have in common is separation from significant others, which in our society is tantamount to social isolation.²⁷ One would expect, then, that persons exposed to such socialization experiences, would anticipate social isolation with anxiety; and, since death is the epitome of social isolation, it is not surprising that it is regarded with dread by persons so raised.

The association of death with social isolation is not simply a one-way affair, however. While a fear of death may stem from anxieties about social isolation, it seems equally true that the process of becoming socially isolated stimulates a concern about death. There are exceptions to this, of course, particularly in cases of voluntary exile. In fact, social isolation for some may be a means to a valued end, such as mystical experiences. When social isolation is involuntary, however, the individual experiencing separation from others may become obsessed with the idea of death. Ordinary values, those previously associated with primary groups or with

society in general, may pale into insignificance when they are no longer shared with significant others. As these values lose their saliency, behavior patterns once structured by culturally shared imperatives may come to be based upon only the grossest considerations of life and death. As a result, the fear of death may come to outweigh the fear of dying, and the person may be motivated toward ego-destructive behavior. On the other hand, the equation of social isolation with death may lead the isolate to regard death with indifference, since he is, in effect, already "dead." In either case, the potential social consequences are profound. Fearing death more than dying is probably instrumental in suicide, dope addiction, alcoholism, and other forms of psychological self-destruction; while feeling indifferent toward death probably motivates such nonpassionate aggressors as professional killers. In any case, when people cease to care about dying, society is deprived of its ultimate deterrent to deviant behavior—execution.

The activity orientation of Americans is so well-known that it hardly requires comment. Indeed, one could make a strong case for considering it the dominant theme in our culture. The value placed on improving one's status by hard work and the traits associated with success—ambition, ingenuity, and assertiveness—are indicators of this activity bias. Those who spend their time wisely, attempting to improve themselves, are praised. Wasting time is looked upon with disfavor by nearly everyone, and as sinful by many. The only acceptable justification for resting seems to be to regain strength, so that work may be attacked with renewed vigor. That this value has a religious basis makes it especially significant. As Weber pointed out, the pre-eminence in capitalistic societies of the value of success through hard work has its root in the Protestant ethic, and particularly in the theology of Calvin. According to Calvin's doctrine of predestination, the only tangible

indications a person has of his fate after death are his attainments on earth; thus, a great value came to be placed upon success, particularly when it was achieved through hard work.²⁸

But the American emphasis on activity goes beyond simply encouraging productive endeavor. So thoroughly engrained is this value that even leisure time is not often spent idly, but rather in some form of diversionary activity. It is the rare person who is able to remain inactive over a period of time and actually enjoy it. One indication of this fact is that persons inactivated against their will, by illness or involuntary retirement, often say, "I might as well be dead." And, with the increasing amount of leisure time among the active, boredom seems to be emerging as a major social problem. A desperate search appears to be on to find more things to do, more games to play, more places to go. It does not occur to many Americans that much time could be spent loafing. One of the important consequences of this over-all association of activity and virtue is that Americans tend to feel guilty and anxious when faced with inactivity, and since death is clearly associated with the latter, it is a state to be feared.

Finally, let us consider some of the behavioral consequences of these cultural themes and of their resultant attitudes. It is apparent that most Americans do not become so thoroughly isolated that they cease to care about death. On the contrary, they manifest acute anxiety about the prospect of death. Symptomatic of this problem is the obsessive spectatoritis concern for death. There is little doubt that many people go to see automobile races because they are attracted by the possibility of human destruction; and television ratings have repeatedly demonstrated the appeal of death and violence. The attraction seems to consist of both fascination and anxiety. (In this respect, American attitudes toward death parallel those toward sex.) Yet, possibly because

the idea of death is so threatening, there exists a strong defensive attempt to deny its significance. This pattern is perhaps most clearly manifest in Western and gangster films, in which a "bang-bang-you're-dead" aura prevails. The impersonality of those killings is striking. One wonders whether the fact that some of those who are "killed" ride again in a new picture may not further support Americans' apparent inability to thoroughly grasp death's finality. Other defensive responses are significant. One is the withdrawal from activities which may be construed as a threat to life, such as flying or sailing. It may be found that the overall worship of security that characterizes a large portion of our population is rooted in the fear of death, as distinct from the fear of dying.

ROTUMAN VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

The Island of Rotuma is somewhat isolated, lying approximately 300 miles north of the Fiji group on the western fringe of Polynesia. Its current population of the island is about 3000, and about 1500 other Rotumans now live in Fiji, with which Rotuma has been politically affiliated since 1881, when it was ceded to Great Britain.²⁹ The culture of the people is basically Polynesian, although influences from Micronesia and Melanesia are also evident. In order to provide a background for comprehending Rotuman values and attitudes toward death, we shall describe some basic features of the social organization and life cycle.

The Rotuman kinship system stresses bilateral principles, with the personal kindred (*kainaga*)³⁰ providing the basis for social relations. Kinship is recognized broadly by American standards; third and fourth cousins, and even more distant relatives, are known and treated as close family members. Relatives assist

one another in various social and economic activities, and come together en masse for important social ceremonies, including funerals. The most important social unit, however, is the individual household, which for the most part is economically self-sufficient. The average household contains seven or eight persons, although many are considerably larger. Most households consist of a nuclear family, with various attached relatives of either the husband or wife. Social relations within the household are generally warm and cordial, even between in-laws, although as elsewhere, antagonisms sometimes develop between even the closest of relatives. In general, although there are somewhat definite rules of behavior among various categories of kin, within the household spontaneity rather than formality is the norm.

Households are organized into social units called *ho'aga*, which work together on community projects under the direction of a subchief, the *fa es ho'aga*. They also assist one another in projects demanding resources beyond the scope of an individual household, including ceremonies. The *ho'aga*, in turn, are grouped into seven districts, each under the direction of a paramount chief, or *gagaj es itu*.

Following its discovery by Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century, Rotuma was subjected to intensive acculturation from whalers, traders, and missionaries. The missionaries were Methodist ministers and Catholic priests, who divided the island between them. Today, approximately two thirds of the population is Methodist, and, except for a few individuals belonging to other Christian sects, the remainder are Catholic. But despite this subjection to prolonged acculturation, Rotuma remains today quite conservative culturally;³¹ and, in 1960, when field work was being carried out, it was a well-integrated community.

The Rotuman life cycle can conveniently be divided into six stages:

infancy (prelinguistic), childhood, school years, youth, adulthood, and old age.

During infancy the child is indulged to the utmost. The Rotumans are open in showing their love of children, and youngsters are the focus of attention in nearly every household. Since the households usually contain many people, there is almost always someone available to hold the infant; and, as a rule, until a child can walk, he is held in someone's arms most of the time. A child is rarely permitted to cry without some attempt being made to soothe it. Such neglect would bring ridicule from neighbors, who would accuse the guardians of being unloving and unkind. The affection displayed for children does not signify a possessive love, however. As in many other Polynesian societies, adoption is a common practice and serves to distribute children from those who have too many to those who have too few. A mother is pleased to give her child to a friend or relative who can give it more attention than she can afford.

Indulgence continues throughout childhood. To Rotumans a loving parent is one who indulges a child's every wish, or at least all of those with which he can possibly comply. Indeed, "to love" (*hanisi*), for Rotumans, implies "to give"—to behave in a loving way—rather than to experience an emotion. A Rotuman parent would find incomprehensible the English statement, "I am punishing you because I love you. It is for your own good." We do not, however, mean to imply that Rotuman children are not disciplined. As soon as a child is capable of understanding shame, ridicule is used as a primary discipline technique. The most important behavioral lesson a child must learn is to discern whom he must respect and with whom he may take license. He must also learn not to show off or act proud. Moreover, Rotuman parents sometimes slap their children simply because of anger or annoyance.

The tone of child rearing is, however, unmistakably warm and indulgent.

During the school years³² the children encounter a somewhat different situation. It is impossible for any teacher—even a Rotuman teacher—to indulge a large number of children all at once, and to teach them besides. Children make obvious overtures for teachers' attention, but at the same time they are restrained by previous training from showing off. In doing school work they generally perform well as long as they are able to maintain mastery, but they usually stop trying in the face of difficulties which are not easily overcome. This low tolerance for frustration, coupled with the withdrawal response, is apparently rooted in the unconditional indulgence experienced in the home. Prior to attending school, a child has to bear little frustration, and subsequently poor performance in school is more likely to be met with by sympathy than by admonishments or exhortations from parents. It is significant that withdrawal from frustration takes place when superiors are involved (objects of respect); in athletic competition, with people of equal rank, the response to frustration is more apt to be overt anger directed toward the opponent or opponents. In neither case, however, is the frustrating challenge likely to become a spur to greater effort until all obstacles are overcome and mastery achieved.

Youth begins when a boy or girl leaves school, which on Rotuma goes only to Form IV, our equivalent of the tenth grade. After that, a student wishing to continue his education must take a standard examination; if he passes it, he may go to an advanced school in Fiji. But the majority stop school at about age sixteen, and assume the roles of young men and women.

Youth is a period of little responsibility, when the most important interpersonal relations are among members of one's own age group. Comradeship between members of the same sex is intense, but the predominant concern is

with surreptitious courtship. At this stage, the young men ordinarily sleep away from their parental homes in special sleeping houses, although they customarily eat with their own family. They form the nucleus of communal labor in every village, but aside from the obligation of participating in community efforts they enjoy a maximum of personal freedom.

The young women are considerably more restricted than the young men. They live at home and are expected to make a serious contribution to the family economy by cooking, washing, cleaning, making mats, and fishing on the reef. Customarily, girls are expected to remain virgins until marriage, which is supposed to be arranged between families. Careful measures are usually taken to restrict a young girl's freedom, so that she cannot get involved in sexual affairs that might cause her family embarrassment. Despite these restrictions, or perhaps more accurately because of them, courtship is a focal point of cultural elaboration, and evokes a great deal of ingenuity and cunning.³³ Romantic attachments take place frequently and with considerable intensity. Jealousy is easily aroused between partners, and suicide (or more often, attempted suicide) is not unknown among rejected suitors. Intense romantic attachments occur because of the indulgence the person receives as a child. Expectations of comparable indulgence persist, and if the focus narrows to one lover, the mood is apt to be further intensified.

Adulthood ordinarily begins with marriage. At this time, both man and wife are expected to assume full social and economic responsibilities within their own household and within the community. Residence at marriage is theoretically uxorialocal, but statistically it is bilocal—the choice depending on various economic and social circumstances. In some rare cases, residence is neolocal. Most newly married couples, therefore, assume a subordinate role in

one of the partners' parental households. For the visiting spouse, the situation may prove a difficult one: because relations between in-laws are supposed to be governed by respect, the visiting spouse, initially at least, may find a sharp contrast with his or her previous history of indulgence from one's own parents. If this period of adjustment is experienced as emotionally too demanding, the visiting spouse may request that his or her partner come to his or her parental home. If such a request is refused divorce or separation may ensue (another manifestation of the Rotuman tendency to respond to frustration by withdrawing). Before too long, however, most men become heads of their own households, and in-law problems are alleviated. On the whole, divorce is infrequent; and, despite the fact that husband and wife are expected to manifest respectful behavior to one another in public by showing restraint, most couples develop a genuinely warm and affectionate attachment, whether or not their union had followed a romantic courtship.

In old age, most individuals yield authority to their mature children. Many old people remain economically productive until their ultimate illness, but their proportionate contribution tends to decrease with time. As grandparents, their greatest emotional pleasures come from the superindulgence with which they treat their grandchildren. Some old people express loneliness, and a few have been completely neglected by children immersed in their own affairs, but most of the elderly are able to maintain an adequate network of interpersonal relations as long as they live.

The characteristic Rotuman attitude towards death markedly contrasts with the morbidity found in American culture. Death is described as an almost pleasant state, one that frees the individual from the burdens of obligation and work. Also striking are the sense of reality and acceptance that Rotumans

manifest when confronted with death. This acceptance is partially due to the fact that most Rotumans are confronted with death far more often than most Americans. Until recent years, the death rate has approximated the birth rate, and since each person is intimately concerned with a large number of relatives and community members, several deaths are likely to affect each person annually. This contrasts with the American pattern, especially among the more mobile elements of the population, in which families are dispersed and community involvement minimal. Since this fact is combined with a low death rate, it tends to make most people's association with death remote; and this makes it easier to maintain an unrealistic attitude about death.

To further understand the Rotuman attitude towards death, we shall examine the prevalent cultural values and relate them to socialization experiences and their apparent behavioral consequences.

First, in contrast to the American pattern, the Rotumans value passivity above activity. Although they are capable of working hard at times, they regard labor as a distasteful though necessary burden. Leisure time is usually spent in relaxation; just sitting around and talking, or preferably eating, is regarded as the most pleasant way of using time. Only in certain recreational activities are Rotumans self-motivated toward substantial physical effort, and even then the resistance of the more conservative old folk is pronounced. They hold that vigorous exertion is a cause of tuberculosis, and warn their children against it. This passivity orientation would seem to be another consequence of childhood indulgence. The loved child is held and fondled; everything is done for him, and he does not have to achieve for this love to continue.

That the resultant passivity has significance for Rotuman attitudes toward death was dramatized during the in-

vestigator's conversation with a Rotuman youth of twenty who served as chief informant. One evening, while sitting around, the young man introduced a conversation with the question, "What do you think is better, to be alive or to be dead?" After receiving an evasive answer and being asked *his* opinion, the young man suggested that it was better to be dead. When asked why, he replied that when one is dead he no longer has to worry about the future, or to work; he can simply rest. He compared death to dreamless sleep. His response aroused curiosity, since he was overtly a devout Catholic. When questioned about Catholic conceptions of afterlife, he indicated that he had never thought about it. Further evidence from other Rotumans demonstrated that his views were widely shared, and that commitment to religious dogma, and to ideology in general, plays a minimal role in the islanders' practice of religion. Their strongest ontological concerns are not otherworldly. They maintain that by being "good," which includes following the appropriate religious ritual, one can avoid misfortune in this world. This is an important consideration, since it indicates that the absence of fear about death is not simply the result of a belief in eternal life.

Second, a person in Rotuma is rarely if ever isolated, particularly during his formative years. Children are virtually never separated from loving adults, and even emotional separation is rare, since one person's withdrawal of love almost invariably brings compassion and sympathy from another. A few individuals—some old people and a few deviants—can be considered as suffering from social isolation, but only when compared to the extensive social relations of their fellows. Such persons still participate in community affairs; their circumstances cannot be compared to the anonymity that characterizes social isolation in an American city. As a result, social isolation is not a real threat to

most Rotumans; and since it is a state never encountered by most youngsters during the socialization process, it is associated neither with punishment nor with loss of personal security.

The inevitable separation at death is also softened. Funeral ceremonies bring together family and community, and people bring gifts (mats or money) to the deceased and say farewell with a nose-to-nose kiss, or by touching the corpse on the forehead. Even when the corpse is taken to the cemetery and buried, his actual isolation is minimized by the fact that the body is buried in an ancestral grave, among "friendly bones." In this respect, the Rotuman conception of death is closer to the Japanese notion of "joining one's ancestors" than to our notion of the "dear departed." Finally, a belief that the ghosts of deceased persons remain active for an indefinite period following death further alleviates the drama of separation.

The most striking feature of a Rotuman funeral, however, is the complete lack of morbidity that pervades the social atmosphere within which it is carried out. Close relatives sit near the corpse, which is laid out in state, and may weep or even wail, but among all but close relatives and friends an attitude of conviviality prevails. As long as one does not flaunt a lack of concern, there are no restrictions on light-hearted play or joking. No one is chastised for not feeling sad.

The association of death with social isolation is also minimized by the fact that almost all bereaved persons have a widely diffused set of primary social relations, and are therefore able to absorb the loss of a love object without significantly increasing their personal isolation. As has been previously pointed out, the network of kinship relations is extensive; and most Rotumans have no difficulty in finding a household into which they are welcome if need be.

Finally, the Rotumans are less con-

cerned than Americans with trying to master the forces of nature. Implicit in their world-view is a complementarity of man and his natural environment. Man exists within nature; he attempts to control it in part, but not to conquer it. Consequently, natural events, including death, are not regarded as enemies or as challenges to man's mastery, but simply as facts of existence. Although not entirely fatalistic, the Rotumans do not seem to suffer from the sense of personal defeat that characterizes Americans when death occurs; nor do they display the same shock. This acceptance of natural events appears to be a corollary of the passivity orientation derived from child-rearing practices. Instead of attacking frustrating events with an eye to eventual victory, they tend to withdraw effort and to reserve their energies for problems which they feel capable of dealing with successfully.

To the Rotumans, then, death is surrounded with neither the morbidity nor the sense of unreality that characterizes it in the United States. It is difficult to trace with any degree of certainty the full effects of the Rotuman attitude, especially in comparison with the American attitude, since many of the problems inherent in complex urban society do not exist in this remote Polynesian community. There are, however, some behavior patterns that tempt speculation. Perhaps most impressive is the lack of a sense of impending disaster that characterizes Rotuman culture. People undertake the most hazardous circumstances with incredible casualness, as long as they are in reasonably familiar surroundings. Near disaster is always laughed at, rather than responded to with warnings of caution. It is not unusual to see a three- or four-year old child swinging a macheta knife in playful imitation of his elders. No one gasps with fright, and his play may be permitted to continue if he is handling the implement reasonably well.

Also impressive is the ease with which

Rotumans are able to leave their families and community, and adapt to a totally new environment. Separation from significant others appears entirely untraumatic, although abundant tears may be shed at the time of departure. Many Rotumans have gone abroad to New Zealand, Australia, or Canada and have expressed no homesickness whatsoever. This ability to easily separate from significant others seems to result less from a weaker degree of personal attachment than from an ability to face a new environment without fear. What anxieties they do manifest are related to social acceptance, but these are easily overcome by learning appropriate behavior patterns. Anxieties stemming from a fear of death are less easily mitigated. In sum, Rotumans appear to enjoy a greater sense of mastery and suffer from less anxiety than do Americans. In part, this is a result of being raised in an environment more easily mastered, but it also seems to be the result of an acquiescence in the life cycle.

CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to estimate the impact of a dominant attitude toward death in a given society. A fear of death may well be found to underlie many forms of free-floating anxiety, at least in Western culture. Such anxiety can be interpreted as a general threat to the human organism's sense of personal mastery—the result of being confronted with the unsolvable problem of avoiding death.

The purpose of this paper has not been to answer questions, but rather to raise them. We do not believe that the solution to our problem lies in an imitation of Rotuman culture. Our attitudes toward life and death, are so basic, so deeply implicit in our view of the world, that we may fail to recognize their importance. The need for research in this area is profound, but until recently ontological problems have been

left to philosophers and poets. Behavioral scientists must not avoid such inquiries simply because our culture regards death so morbidly. We must recognize the cultural basis of such an attitude. This is an area pre-eminently suited for interdisciplinary effort, in which psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians all have important contributions to make. Research could begin in areas most obviously associated with death, such as bereavement behavior. The passing of a significant other is apt to trigger all of the connotations which death holds for the individual. In addition comparative research on this topic, a study of the role of attitudes toward death in various types of destructive behavior could yield fresh insights.

Perhaps the most profound argument for urging study of the problem is that adequate knowledge could lay the foundation for intelligent programs of preventive social psychiatry. Attitudes are subject to guided change—through altered socialization techniques, through education and by means of mass media. If persons were freed from misconceptions about death, many whose creative energies are now stymied could seek solutions to genuinely resolvable and vitally important problems of existence.

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30. In the orthography being used, the *g* should be pronounced like the English *ng*, as in "singing"; apostrophes are used as glottal signs.

31. See A. Howard, "Conservatism and Non-Traditional Leadership in Rotuma," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 72 (in press).
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