Introduction

My acquaintance with the Palawan people of Palawan Island in the Philippines dates from 1970. I conducted fieldwork from 1970 to 1972 in the central highlands near Brooke’s Point, in the Mekagwaq and Tamlang River basins. I gathered there most of the data I used for my PhD dissertation and further publications (see Macdonald 1972, 1973, 1974a–c, 1977a–b, 1988a–b, 1996, 2002). In 1972 and in subsequent years I visited several other areas in southern Palawan and observed a number of Palawan subgroups. One section of the Palawan people I visited was located in the southwestern corner of the southernmost portion of the island. It consisted of two adjacent lowland areas located in the Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan River basins (see map 1). Although this is a lowland or hill area from an environmental and ecological point of view, it is and was for centuries inhabited by tribal people practicing shifting agriculture and collecting a variety of products from the forests, rivers, mangroves, and reefs.

In the early 1970s there were almost no Christian settlers in this area. Access was difficult. One had to walk across the island, or take a boat, or use a small plane flown by the New Tribes Missions between their main base in Lada, near Brooke’s Point, and Megkelip or Latud, their field stations in southwestern Palawan.

The Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan River basins remain one of the few magic spots I have visited during my lifetime. It floated in remote and hazy confines of the real world. A remarkably fine-looking people inhabited its low, rolling hills and secluded valleys sloping gently towards the South China Sea. Elegant young ladies wearing sequined tops and red scarves, dignified elders in high headgear, and muscular young men in G-strings welcomed the foreign visitor with the usual mixture of endearing warmth and shyness found elsewhere among this indigenous cultural community.

Compared to the highland indigenous peoples I had lived with, the peoples established in the Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan River basins presented to my inquisitive eye
several unusual traits. One was a developed institution of courtship. Its visible sign was the numerous small huts on high stilts, decorated like dollhouses, where young maidens entertained their suitors, who plied them with sweet words and music from their long, two-stringed lutes (*kutjapi*). Another unusual characteristic was the large size of the local settlements, composed of up to fifty houses, in contrast to the tiny highland hamlets that usually contained no more than ten houses.

At the center of the area lived Tuking, the great shaman and spiritual leader in Kulbi, heir to such famed and legendary shamans as Pedjat or Nambun. People from all corners of the Kulbi-Kenipaqan River basins and beyond would come and visit him to receive his blessings and listen to his prayers, which he dispensed endlessly in the vastness of his large house, open to all visitors.

The peoples’ houses, their dress, their settlements, even the way they danced to the music and beat of the gongs, had something that was both familiar and different, more elegant, perhaps, more refined, but equally cheerful. Their religion was marked by large ceremonies of a kind very different from all those observed elsewhere in Palawan (Macdonald 1997). They also spoke a slightly different dialect from the one spoken in the central highlands, but it was not one that I could not understand.

There was one single feature, however, that I could not fathom. Ever since I had set foot on that remote corner, I heard constant references to self-inflicted death. I was bewildered by remarks to the effect that “one would just take a length of rattan, tie it to the roof beam and . . . that’s it!” A number of recent occurrences of suicide were pointed out to me. Suicide seemed to be an ever-present topic of conversation. People were threatening to commit suicide and said it with no apparent levity. They could name victims.

At the time, in the early 1970s, there was a case of land grabbing that occupied the minds of the people and was of great concern to them. An entrepreneur from Brooke’s Point had appropriated a vast tract of land in the lower Kulbi River basin and had turned it into pastureland for his cattle, water buffaloes that were running wild and threatening people. The danger that local people felt of losing their land was apparently a major concern to them, and people were speaking of killing themselves in connection with this problem. I concluded, of course, that suicide was their reaction to the violent and sudden intrusion of the outside world in the guise of particularly aggressive townspeople and to the danger of losing their land.

The fact is, I was not prepared to see suicide as a characteristic feature of the Palawan people or their culture. I had spent almost two years with them and had never come across a case of suicide during my stay, nor could I recall anyone reporting a case or even mentioning the topic. Suicide in Kulbi-Kenipaqan, I thought, had to be an exogenous and momentary pathology. I was wrong.
Subsequent visits to the same area in the late 1970s and early and mid-1980s convinced me that suicide was an endemic and enduring phenomenon repeating itself with unusual and stubborn frequency. Land had long reverted to its traditional owners. The threat posed by the cattle breeder had vanished, and his water buffaloes were all dead. True, a mining company had carved a dirt road and was digging for silica on nearby hills, creating runoff and silt deposits that killed populations of sago palms. Christian lowland settlers were slowly invading the land. The old days of remoteness and isolation were coming to an end. But nothing seemed to have shaken the people and their way of life. History was proceeding at a leisurely and gentle pace. There was no cause for great alarm. Yet people killed themselves.

Suicide was not something I had ever envisioned as a topic of inquiry that would occupy me full time. But it dawned on me that this was indeed a most intriguing and enduring feature of the Kulbi-Kenipaqan people. As a result, I finally decided to devote some time to the study of this strange and disturbing phenomenon. I spent several months in 1989 studying suicide in Kulbi. I gathered systematic information and made a list of all cases that had happened in recent years as well as all cases that my informants could remember. Numbers indicated a staggering rate of occurrence, which was confirmed by a follow-up on the 1989 study. I continued this survey until 2002.
Suicide, I was able to establish, was a feature characterized, in this particular area only, by a consistently high rate of occurrence. Figures show that it is probably the highest or second highest rate in the world. Why? Why would suicide, in such staggering numbers, affect those people whose society and culture is in no basic way different from other Palawan people, their immediate and non-suicidal neighbors in the hills and mountains of southern Palawan? Why would such seemingly happy and comparatively well-off people, going about their lives in orderly fashion, fall victims to despair? The fact of self-inflicted death, with its sheer massive presence, begs some kind of explanation. There is something about the idea of suicide that compels one to ask why and to not rest unless a satisfactory answer is found. Cannibalism and head-hunting may appear to be strange habits, and one could write a book about them without providing any immediate motives for such behavior. It is just, would say a layman, something tribal people do. The anthropologist usually offers a set of beliefs and symbolic arrangements that make sense of such institutions, and the public seems reasonably satisfied that an explanation has been provided. But with suicide, at least the nonprescriptive type, exotic habits or strange customs will not suffice as an explanation. There must be motives. The realm of the psychological must be entered. That is also why this book deals with the wider question of the etiology of suicide, and more particularly as to whether social anthropology or the social sciences more generally can explain it, and to what extent.

As for that particular case in Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan, I could not find any clear answer. The phenomenon was mysterious and a complete puzzle. What was the solution to it, and where could it be found? Being an anthropologist, I have turned to anthropological explanations first, and in this volume I shall review some of those explanations. My first attempts at providing a convincing anthropological account failed. I shall explain why. Other directions will have to be explored, and I shall suggest a few.

One of the main points I want to establish here is the fact of suicide as a stable, collective phenomenon among the people of Kulbi. Next I want to understand it better. Who does it? How many do it? How? When? What makes them do it? To answer such questions, it is not enough to list all known occurrences of the phenomenon. Rather, one needs to probe the representations and concepts relating to suicide and death that are current in the language and culture of the area. One must also know how people live, think, behave, and relate to each other. This leads to writing an extensive ethnographic account of the Palawan people from Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan, and indeed this is another major goal of this book. Suicide cannot be accounted for in any given society without explaining how that society functions. Hence the first part of this book is devoted to analyzing and interpreting the local way of life, values, concepts, and culture of the Palawan people from Kulbi-Kenipaqaqan. The major focus and central topic
indeed remains suicide, but considering the generally accepted view that suicide rates reflect social conditions and that suicidal behavior is determined or at least largely influenced by sociological factors, whatever could be said about suicide in this particular group of people has to be matched by a close investigation of its structure, of its present as well as past circumstances. If this is not done, any hypothesis or explanation would be dismissed as not appropriately contextualized, and lingering doubts would remain as to what causes high rates of suicide, with the suspicion that it could be accounted for by unexplored sections of the group’s culture or social life. This again explains the need to provide the reader with a rather detailed and extensive ethnographic description.

At first I hesitated. I did not want to put the culture of these people in the light of a collective suicidal obsession. Even if suicide rates are exceptionally high in Kulbi, one has to be reminded that people who actually commit the act are a very small minority. The majority of its population holds on to life-asserting values and expresses a great joy of living. The entire population definitely does not live in gloom and doom—quite the contrary. Moreover, suicide is not a theme around which the local culture is built. Values and rules governing interpersonal conduct, the structure of the family, or religious ceremonies are not focused on death or suicide. As we are going to see, suicide is somewhat of a puzzle for the people of Kulbi themselves. I want, therefore, to present this now fast-vanishing tribal culture in its own terms, as an enduring type of human organization, similar to many that have been described in this part of the world, yet original and independently creative.

Part One consists of an ethnographic account of the Kulbi people, much of it presenting traits similar to, or identical with, other sections of the same ethnic group. Chapter 1 will cover the demography, geography, and socioecology of the people living in the Kulbi-Kenipaqaq River basins, paying close attention to group formation and the spatialization of social ties. In chapter 2, I will turn my attention to the more material aspects of their culture while scrutinizing semantic and symbolic dimensions of objects and technical activities in the domesticated as well as the nondomesticated realms. Kinship, marriage, and law form the subject matter of chapter 3. Here are answers are given as to what forms the basis of their collective life. A common thread runs through these chapters, and the reader will discover that within a world of considerable personal autonomy and freedom there are concerns that recur with great constancy and provide the themes around which social life recreates itself in a stable and fairly smooth manner. Chapter 4 provides some insights into the spiritual world of the Palawan people from Kulbi-Kenipaqaq. With its share of threatening and hostile supernatural beings, the universe remains one that is inhabited by “humans,” although of a “different sort,” and therefore a world within which it is reasonably safe to live, provided one takes some precautions. Chapter 5
gets closer to the topic of suicide. It addresses the local theory of emotions and the words that provide the vocabulary and idiom of indigenous commentaries on suicide. There, in the way of a local explanation, we find which character traits or what kind of emotional configuration is supposed to underscore suicidal behavior. This chapter also provides a few insights into personality traits that may be specifically geared towards a process of self-destruction. It is an opposite transition to the second part of the book.

Part Two, indeed, focuses on the topic of suicide. It starts with the account of Sumling’s death and its aftermath (chap. 6). Hers is a well-documented case and one to which I devoted long hours of study, asking many questions and taping discussions, which I then translated. The chapter will provide the reader with a notion of how society treats suicide and the conflicting views local people have of it. For some the victim is a passive agent pushed into death by the wrongdoings of someone else; for others it is “fate” or the outcome of unfathomable forces of the heart. This example of a suicide case sets the stage for what follows. In chapter 7 I tackle the problem of suicide in Kulbi by listing all cases that I have been able to document through accounts given by kinsfolk and acquaintances of the victims. This chapter provides the raw data with which chapter 8 is built. Here, statistical information is analyzed according to different variables and dimensions that are combined into typical suicidal patterns. I come up tentatively with five “profiles” that can be taken as recurring scenarios and thus provide a more integrated frame of understanding, bringing together motivations, actors, and circumstances. Still, these profiles are too diverse to hang, so to speak, onto one cultural or sociological peg. At this point two questions need to be raised. First, does there exist a standard explanation for suicide in anthropology? I thus examine, in chapter 9, various approaches to suicide in the specialized anthropological literature. I address first the epistemological issues that are at stake in any approach to the etiology of suicide. I then review a number of cases studied by anthropologists. This review of the specialized literature has another aim—to answer the second question: are there other groups in the world that display high rates of suicide, and if so, what might they have in common? Chapter 9 serves to gather facts in a comparative perspective.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize the critical points in the anthropological study of suicide. I find that specific socioanthropological models explain very little or nothing at all when it comes to suicide of the nonprescriptive kind. I find also that when an entire group, or section of an ethnic group, displays a globally high rate of suicide, anthropologists tend, with some exceptions, to account for it through concepts that are inadequate and address only an aspect or part of the phenomenon. I make room for a discussion on aggression and violence, especially the concept of redirected aggression, and express doubts about its explanatory value.
In the concluding section I present my own hypothesis. It combines several kinds of factors and is based on what is known elsewhere and on works of other scientists in a number of fields. While dismissing an explanation resting solely on cultural or social-structural variables, I propose to look at the phenomenon (a stable and high rate of suicide) from the point of view of neurobiology and genetics as well as from a psychological, social, and historical perspective. Similar cases reported from other parts of the world, where a section of an ethnic group displays an inordinately high rate of suicide, call for a notion of a genetically inherited predisposition within an endogamous population. While such a genetically defined predisposition to suicidal behavior seems to be granted by neurobiology and genetics, it does not explain all. This is where I introduce two concepts that may explain things better. One is a long-term (several generations) propagation of a collective suicidal trend, which I call a “wave” and which I hypothesize could have been initiated by an event of catastrophic nature. This idea rests on the well-documented tendency for suicide rates to be highly epidemic in nature. A sudden and dramatic rise in the mortality rate could have started a spate of suicides. Partial proof of this is provided by a recent skin-ulcer epidemic that raised the mortality and at the same time the suicide rate of the population under study. The other concept also relates to the wave hypothesis. I make the point that young children, because they are exposed to a number of suicidal acts in their close social and family environment, internalize it as an option for crisis situations. This I consider to be part of an ontogenetical socialization process. In a way, suicide is a learned behavior. If one puts together a genetically inherited predisposition, the imitation factor, and the socialization process whereby the suicide option is deeply internalized by most individuals, one might be able to account for this puzzling conundrum. Since specific social-structural variables are not called into account for the overall rate, and since this type of behavior conflicts with explicitly stated social and cultural values, one could call it “uncultural.” Or is it? Perhaps “culture” as anthropologists look at it, as a symbolic structure or as a set of rules and values, does not really explain all aspects of human behavior and says little about the real inner conflicts that decide individual fate.