THE SOCIAL ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUICIDE: AFRICA AND ALASKA

A comparison between the Fanti of the Gold Coast of Africa and the Thlinget of Alaska reveals the shared idea that under some circumstances, one individual can be held accountable for the suicide of another. However, these groups do not share the same idea of what constitutes a just outcome. As with all other loss, the death of an individual means a loss to the group with whom that individual was affiliated. The Fanti resolve the situation by expecting the guilty party to commit suicide in the same manner as the victim (Cruickshank, 1966: 210). This practice appears to balance the books socially because it punishes the person who is seen as the catalyst to these events, though the threat of suicide can also be malicious and used as a tactic to manipulate others. The Thlinget, in contrast, deal with the loss in suicide by accepting payment from the tribe or family unit of the guilty person (Jones, 1914: 195). Because the Thlinget hold that all death must be avenged, compensatory payment following suicide is seen to restore balance in the community. This paper explores the underlying assumptions about suicide and responsibility for suicide in these and other groups.