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## MU-GHAYEB: A CULTURE-SPECIFIC RESPONSE TO BEREAVEMENT IN OMAN

SAMIR AL-ADAWI, RUSTAM BURJORJEE & IHSAN AL-ISSA

### SUMMARY

Studies with normal subjects and patients suggest that in grieving the dead, the bereaved has to go through a progressive course of psychological and social reorganization. The *Mu Ghayeb* belief in Omani society involves a complete denial of the loss for a relatively long period with the expectation of the return of the dead. This belief persists even after an elaborate ritual of burial and a prescribed period of mourning. The deceased are expected to leave the grave after burial and join their families when the spell placed on them by a sorcerer is broken or counteracted. Although the *Mu Ghayeb* belief is inconsistent with Muslim religion, it may be explained in terms of sudden and untimely death which used to be rife in the seafaring Omani society.

### INTRODUCTION

Although bereavement is a universal human experience, reactions to it tend to vary from one culture to another (Eisenbruch, 1984a,b; Schreiber, 1995). It has been suggested that the normal response to bereavement and the process involved in coping with it tend to unfold in a particular way. The individual has to go through “grief work” by first accepting the reality of the loss and then work through the pain of the grief that should be followed by detachment from the deceased (eg. Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1972; Worden, 1991). Cross-cultural studies of responses to bereavement may throw a light on the universality of different aspects of the grief reaction.

In the West, clinical observations have well-established the different stages of coping with irrevocable loss. The first reaction, denial of the reality of the loss, is manifested in the form of preoccupation with the deceased persons and the desire to reach them (Parkes, 1972). Some of the bereaved may sense the actual presence of the deceased and may engage in the interpretation of signals and sounds as if they had returned (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1970). The search for the deceased may also involve misidentifying others or scanning the environment in the hope of finding them alive. Mourners may actually experience visual and auditory hallucinations of the deceased or feel an intuitive sense of their presence (Osterweis *et al.* 1984; Rando, 1988). Part of the denial of the loss may involve “mummification”, retaining possessions of the deceased in a “mummified” condition ready for use when the dead person returns (Gorer, 1965; Worden, 1991). However, after accepting the reality of the loss, the bereaved person is expected to acknowledge and work through the pain associated with the loss. Suppressing this pain is thought to result in lasting emotional damage to the bereaved (Morris, 1958; Worden, 1991) usually in the form of depression (Bowlby, 1980; Kissane &

Bloch, 1994). Engel (1961) compared the trauma of loss to the physiological trauma of being severely wounded or burned. The process of mourning is viewed by Engel as similar to the process of healing from physical illness. In order to avoid suffering from mental and physical illness, the bereaved must confront and express their feelings and reactions to the loss. Any other alternative patterns of reaction are usually regarded as pathological or deviant (Brown & Stoudemire, 1983; Osterweis *et al.* 1984; Simons, 1985).

Studies in non-Western cultures (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987, 1992–1993) indicate that reactions to loss in some societies do not conform to those observed in the West and that the absence of grief is not associated with harmful consequences. Among the Navajo, for example, Miller and Schoenfeld (1973) reported that the accepted pattern of mourning limits grieving to a period of four days, during which excessive demonstration of emotion is not allowed. Following the four days, the bereaved resume work with no further discussion or expression of emotions towards their loss.

Ablon (1971) also reported that Samoans tend to have a short grief period without any manifestation of symptoms of distress and depression. Among this group and other non-Western cultures, there is no working through the loss for achieving detachment from the deceased, but rather an active cultivation of the continued sense of the presence of the deceased as an ‘ancestor’ that remains accessible to the mourner to talk and to communicate with (Al-Issa, 1995; Collis, 1966). Hence, there is no need to work through the loss in order to adapt to life without the deceased (Stroebe, 1992–1993). The behaviour of the bereaved in Western nineteenth century society described by Rosenblatt (1983) indicates preoccupation and close attachment to rather than detachment from the deceased (e.g. praying for the deceased, belief in reunion in heaven, child-naming after the deceased, and using the wishes of the deceased as guidance for action). We observed the same preoccupation with the deceased in two Muslim countries, Iraq and Oman, with no apparent maladaptive consequences.

In this paper, we deal with *Mu Ghayeb*, a culture specific response to death in an Arab-Muslim country, Oman. *Mu Ghayeb* involves the total denial of death and the strong hope for the imminent return of the deceased. This culturally sanctioned denial continues for a relatively long period when the mourning rituals are over, with no apparent adverse psychological or physical effects.

#### The *Mu Ghayeb* response to bereavement

In traditional Omani society, a sudden, untimely death is often associated with the ‘*Mu Ghayeb*’ belief. The term literally means that the person is ‘not dead’, ‘gone’, ‘taken-away’, ‘stolen’, ‘disappeared’. The belief is claimed to have been mentioned in the Hadith (the tradition of the prophet Mohammed) but there is no evidence to support this claim.

In its common use in Oman, the *Mu Ghayeb* concept implies the ‘stealing’ of the ‘dead’ individuals from their family through a magician, who has attained his power from some unspeakably horrible act, such as eating his own children. The magician places a spell on the chosen individual from pure malice, or occasionally from other reasons. Consequently, the targeted individual appears to be dead or ‘experience death of a sudden nature’, while in fact he is still alive. As in the normal course of mourning rituals, the deceased is washed and buried by his family, in the presence of other relatives and friends. After the funeral, the bereaved family usually observes three days of mourning or more depending on the

socioeconomic status of the deceased and the community to which he belongs. Although people who come to express their condolences disperse at the end of the mourning period, family members may refrain from indulging in protocol that entails ceremony, e.g. a wedding, for at least forty days.

Grieving the deceased by the family, friends and acquaintances seems to indicate their acceptance of the reality of the loss. However, they continue to believe that the individuals are still alive. They are, therefore, expected to rise from the grave, and move around to lead a shadowy existence, sleeping naked in a cave during the day, and rising at night to wander the countryside, feeding on leaves, and performing the orders of the magician, the master or the controller. During this period, the dead may be seen as a wraith-like figure at night by their family and friends. Alternatively, such individuals may be reported as being seen normally clothed (during daylight) in rapidly passing cars, or in other situations, not easily amenable to verification. They have never been seen naked since this would offend modesty.

According to the cases related to us, the return of the "deceased" to their families can occur in one of the two ways. Firstly, the magician may be discovered and be killed, or destroyed in some other way (this includes his own natural death). At the death of the magician all the people he has enthralled become automatically free, and return to their families. The discovery of the "deceased" can sometimes be accomplished with the aid of a white magician. Recently, there have been cases in which the relatives of the deceased invited a *mganga*, a native healer from Africa to help free their "enthralled" loved one (cf. Ndosi, 1995). Alternatively, the enchanted persons may be discovered wandering and be overpowered: if they are hit on the forehead with a stone, they become automatically released from bewitchment. While everyone in the community has heard of someone who has returned to his or her family after death, no one knows of such a case at first hand.

The *Mu Ghayeb* belief system tends to develop gradually. It normally takes between three and six months to develop and be firmly established. Often the consequence of this belief is frenetic activity, involving the consultation of magicians and wise men, sitting up at night to look for the deceased and so on. The "mummification" behaviour reported by Gorer (1965) is also observed among the family of the bereaved. The intensity and duration of *Mu Ghayeb*, like grieving elsewhere, depends on a personal relationship and the age of the deceased. According to Prince (1993), parental grieving over the death of a child often seems most intense; grieving for a major family breadwinner may be exaggerated by the loss of economic support in addition to personal loss; the expected death of the elderly is often accompanied by less intense grief and may even be welcomed with a sense of relief. It appears that the entertainment of *Mu Ghayeb* also depends on the events leading to loss and the relationship before the death. All the suspected cases reported to us by their relatives have followed a sudden and unexpected death of either sex, but more often male. The belief is widespread if a person commands an important role in his family or a tribe. Such a person is likely to have attracted *husda*, meaning envy or jealousy. However, the belief is almost non-existent if a person was terminally ill or elderly.

We have observed that *Mu Ghayeb* tends to resolve in two ways. First, the bereaved starts to believe that even if the spell placed on the "deceased" is broken, s/he would not likely be the same person again. Although no one knows of such a case at first hand, it is claimed that those "deceased" who have been "found" and returned home were noted "with no tongues or minds of their own". Second, the bereaved starts to believe that the suffering during

“captivity” would be likely anyway to result in premature death of the enthralled person. It is rare to meet individuals in whom the belief has become chronic and persistent for a considerably longer period of time. These rituals usually fade away about three to six months after its development. This is a time we noted that the bereaved tend to stop their preoccupation with *Mu Ghayeb*. Instead they cultivate the ideas that the departed one “has joined his or her final journey and is in peace in the hand of God” and no further discussion or expression of pining reemerged, unless the memory of departed person is rekindled, eg. a visit by a close relative from a far off land who did not attend the funeral or a birth of a new baby the deceased left behind within his wife.

## DISCUSSION

Studies on the process of mourning, bereavement and grieving have suggested that manifestation of bereavements is shaped by cultural value and tradition (Brown & Stoudermire, 1983). Others have reported social prescription that some communities have employed in order to sanction psychological denial against immediate acceptance of the reality of death (Rosenblatt *et al.* 1976; Freed & Freed, 1990). The most common social prescriptions that are activated when loss occurs include denial and incorporation (Prince, 1993).

Stress research also shows that at times when the reality of loss becomes too anxiety provoking, denial could be a beneficial coping mechanism (Epstein, 1967; Horowitz, 1983). Janof-Bulman and Timko (1987) have shown that denial is an adaptive process with trauma victims. Stroebe (1992–1993) pointed out that the “reality of a death cannot be confronted all of the time, and that periods of disbelief occur, particularly in the immediate aftermath of loss” (p. 35).

*Mu Ghayeb* is similar to, and an exaggerated form of, denial of the reality of death observed in the West (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1970, 1972; Worden, 1991). For Western professionals, such an extreme denial appears to border on psychotic delusion and may form the “core of psychotic reaction” (cf. Kastenbaum, 1986). However, *Mu Ghayeb* is a culturally determined and sanctioned belief which helps the bereaved to deal with the psychological consequences of loss. It is possible that those frenetic activities raise the expectation of the eventual return of the deceased to their families and may help to ‘decathect’ the mental representation of loss. It is quite similar to delusory cultural beliefs which are accepted by the group, but appear abnormal to an outsider (Murphy, 1967). We attempt to understand this belief within the framework of the Muslim religion of the country or other cultural characteristics of the Omani people. Death is foreordained in Islam and the time of death is “written” at birth by God. Islam means total submission to God and to grieve excessively is to question His will (Chaleby *et al.* 1995; Wikan, 1988). However, there is subcultural diversity among Muslim countries in the expression of grief. In Morocco and Egypt, for example, bereaved women wail (scream, yell, beat their breasts) and express sadness intensely, a behaviour incompatible with Islam (Chkili *et al.* 1981; Wikan, 1988). Indeed a mourner may be hired to recite religious verses or praise the deceased in order to heighten emotional expression. In contrast, mourning is rather subdued in Saudi Arabia (Chaleby *et al.* 1995) or expressed in cheers and laughter in the Balinese Muslim community (Wikan, 1988). Muslims also carry out elaborate rituals associated with the ablution of the



deceased, communal prayer for the deceased and burial. Three, seven or forty days are devoted to mourning depending on the personal circumstances of the bereaved family. Omanis follow the same Muslim traditional practices in the mourning of their dead. It is therefore expected that such elaborate burial and mourning rituals would facilitate acceptance of the loss and affirm the fact that the loss has happened. Furthermore, acceptance of death may also be facilitated by the Islamic portrayal of life and death as a continuous process leading to an eternal desirable afterlife where the faithful will be united with their loved ones (Smith & Haddad, 1981). The Muslim rituals of burial and mourning as well as the belief in afterlife seem to be incompatible with the *Mu Ghayeb* belief.

In contrast, the Muslim belief that death is preordained and could happen at any moment with and without an apparent cause may increase the level of death anxiety and denial. Indeed, two studies found that Egyptian Muslims report death anxiety levels slightly higher than those of Canadian and U.S. adult subjects (Abdul-Khalek, 1986; Beshai & Templer, 1978). However, when a group of Saudi Arabian students in the US who reported a high degree of religiosity were studied by Long and Elghanemi (1987), it was found that the most religious subjects reported relatively less fear of death. We suggest that the *Mu Ghayeb* belief and perhaps death anxiety are both associated with sudden and unexpected death in the Omani traditional society rather than with Muslim beliefs. The relationship between death anxiety, the *Mu Ghayeb* and Muslim beliefs among Omani subjects is an interesting topic for future research.

The *Mu Ghayeb* belief or the denial of the reality of death in Omani society may be mainly related to culture-specific stressors rather than Muslim beliefs. Oman lies on the southeast border of the Arabian peninsula. Among other Territories surrounding the Persian and Oman Gulfs, Oman is the most isolated, with the sea enclosing the country on three sides and the forbidding sandy desert of Al-Rub' Al-Khali (the empty Quarter) on the fourth. The country's contacts with the rest of the world had been, with few exceptions, via the sea. Besides providing a link with the outside world, the sea has connected Oman's coastal towns and provided a source of livelihood for many of its people. The desert, on the other hand, had been primarily a barrier cutting off Oman from intimate contact with the interior of the Arabian peninsula (Landen, 1967).

Although Oman is part of the Gulf region, it has its distinct history and subculture. With a long coastline, enterprising population, and, most important, strategic geographical location for sea routes, Omani maritime exploration had sailed to the East as far as China and to the Mozambique channel in the south. Long before the advent of Islam, Oman's shipping industry and seafaring had been a keystone to its economy (Landen, 1967). Omani young men had been exposed to the vagaries of the sea and its dangers in the *baglas* (wooden ships) before the appearance of steam-powered ships.

These voyages resulted in the establishment of Omani settlement in East Africa and the subsequent adoption of the island of Zanzibar as a centre of her dominion. The adventurous spirit of the Omanis has taken its toll in human loss during the long risky trips across the seas. The vast geographical reaches, separated by high seas, may have resulted in the institutionalization of cultural mechanisms in order to cope with the consequences of constant dangers often encountered during sea voyages in the past. The occasional return of young men many years after being presumed dead during long voyages was part of the precarious life in the sea and might have reinforced the *Mu Ghayeb* belief. The fate of these seamen was

almost always unknown during their voyages across the seas; sudden and untimely death of young seamen had been rife in this society. Similar to the bereaved in the West (Parkes, 1981; Rando, 1988), Omanis reacted more intensely to sudden death (cf. Shanfield *et al.* 1987; Range & Calhoun, 1990), found it difficult to accept the sudden loss and used denial to reduce the painful impact of grief. In its present form, the *Mu Ghayeb* belief is a remnant of an adaptive response to sudden death and is expected to disappear with acculturation and the decreased importance of seafaring in Omani society. However, for the traditional Omani society, *Mu Ghayeb* has brought hope, reduced the stress of sudden death and facilitated a long but easy transition through bereavement. These institutionalized negations of death seem to allow the “grief work” to take place without the necessity of accepting the loss prematurely.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the Muslim-Arab culture, there is some evidence that people may suffer from chronic grief which is associated with depression and other psychiatric disorders (Chaleby *et al.* 1995; Chkili *et al.* 1981). Although these studies support the notion that failure to experience different stages of bereavement results in pathological mourning, they were based on clinical observation of Westernized Muslim patients. The *Mu Ghayeb* response to bereavement in the traditional Omani Arab-Muslim society tends to involve a prolonged denial of the reality of death even after elaborate burial and mourning rituals without apparent adverse effects on the bereaved. Although the bereaved go through mourning rituals for a relatively short period of time, they still continue to deny the reality of death and wait for the return of the “deceased”. It is believed that the deceased will leave the grave after burial, live in a cave, and then start roaming the fields and streets. They cannot join their family unless the spell placed on them by a sorcerer is broken or counteracted. This prolonged denial of death which is expected to harm survivors emotionally and physically, tends to serve an adaptive function in reducing the strong impact of sudden and untimely death in traditional Omani society. Future research may investigate the interaction between bereavement, the *Mu Ghayeb* belief, and the development of pathological grief in Omani society which is undergoing a rapid process of acculturation and Westernization.

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