Harsh transition to a new way of death

by Rufus Reade

We publish below the first of a series of papers on the special problems of bereavement in immigrants. The Vietnamese Boat People may not be the largest immigrant group in Britain but the special circumstances of their lives makes them one of the most needy.

Since Rufus Reade's article first appeared in **Social Work Today** (30.6.81) we have read of the tragic suicide of a 13-year old Vietnamese girl, Phung, who hanged herself in the lavatory after the death of her father. Her father had been a lay priest of Buddhism and Taoism as well as a decorative artist and noodle-maker.

But in this country his skills had not enabled him to get a job and the family had found themselves isolated and poor in a large flat in a bleak GLC housing estate. When Phung's father died of cancer it is hardly surprising that her mother became depressed. One of her father's religious duties had been to attend the home of newly-bereaved families in order to drive out spirits, but after his death the family are said to have felt the presence of his disturbed spirit in the flat. They applied for rehousing but only succeeded getting themselves on to a non-urgent waiting list.

With hindsight we can begin to glimpse some reasons for this girl's death, but what can we do to prevent other bereavement suicides and to alleviate the numerous problems which are faced by other immigrant families when bereavement adds yet another grief to the catalogue of losses which so often lead up to and follow the act of emigration? There are no simple answers. Each family is unique and we must find ways to make contact, to understand and to communicate our willingness to be of help.

We must expect communication to be difficult but it is seldom impossible. We must expect to meet anger and suspicion, for these are part of grief, and we are likely to be seen as representatives of an alien culture. But that does not mean that we should not try to allay the fears of people who, willingly or unwillingly, have come to be among us.

Given time and the will to help it is possible to bridge cultural gaps. If we take pains to understand the other person's view of the world we shall eventually find that they will take pains to understand ours. In the end, all people are in the same boat.

Colin Murray Parkes

Mui came from a Chinese family in Vietnam. The wife of a carpenter, she escaped with her husband and children by boat and after nine months in a camp in Hong Kong came to Britain, where she spent eight months in a refugee centre before being settled into a large council house. At the centre she had learned the rudiments of British life and a little English. Resettlement brought a house, neighbours, enormous distance from fellow Vietnamese, an unemployed husband, children who were quickly outdistancing her in their English language skills, the non-availability of customary foods, no local knowledge, a strange and bitter climate, peculiar gifts of money and goods from a social security system that bewildered her, the symbols of the rich—their TVs and cassette players, and a complete cultural ineptness that made her feel clumsy and her actions inappropriate.

Sense of loss

A refugee must grieve for everything once known and now a memory still half believed in, still half sought after. In this process of grief the refugee moves through the sense of loss, to guilt, then to anger at the deprivation. There may follow a loss of patterns of conduct with social/psychological disorganisation. Hopefully, a reconciliation with the change will come. But some refugees remain fixed in the sense of loss, continuing to crave for what was once their familiar daily world.

So grieving, the refugee must also learn the new skills of her adopted society: an adult feeling like a child in this process of learning, making mistakes and finding progress slow. That sense of identity so totally removed and washed away can now begin to grow. But in any culture there are keys to identity, without which there can be no full identity.

Shared identity

In the refugee's home society, where unemployment may be uncommon, to work and be a father, to work and be a mother, to reap and thank the Gods, all help stabilise the sense of identity in the individual. In the West, each facet of life is often separate from the other. Who you are has one meaning at your place of work and another meaning in your home. The refugee in Britain may only have his family around him, with only their language, their food and their religion common to them. They share a private and restricted knowledge of who they are. Without the language of their neighbours and an occupation, they cannot have a wider sense of shared identity.

The problems of being a refugee are faced in several ways: the refugee may elect to fight, by learning the new language and looking for work. Those who learn the language soonest are those most likely to survive and succeed. Many turn inwards because they find the struggle too great. Others appear to



Derek Nuttall writes:

Bereavement takes us into unfamiliar territory, practically as well as emotionally. There are many practical consequences to be faced, some so foreign they cause panic and fears of never being able to cope. Much depends on how many of our partner's skills we learned before bereavement and seeing the struggle we have later is a very strong argument for such an exchange of skills. Many resist this, for all kinds of reasons, but we make things worse for ourselves later if we do.

Cooking is something I have problems with. I have little interest in it, can cope only with the most basic of tasks and create either jokes or an evacuation by the family when I attempt it! It is a pity because meals are so important. Like other functions eating satisfies physical needs but represents and symbolises deeper things as well, especially for a family. A permanent gap at the meal table is a great loss and eating alone lacks the satisfaction and stimulation of shared occasions. The food itself and the pleasure of preparing it are less interesting too very often.

I recall a widower talking with pride and excitement of the first invitation he issued after his wife's death to friends to join him for a lunch he had prepared without help. It worked very well and although there would no doubt be painful memories around the table, it gave him a sense of achievement and marked another step forward. It was an illustration that in bereavement recovery often consists of achieving goals that previously were insignificant but now seem well out of reach. To re-phrase—a small step for most of us but a giant step for the individual concerned.

Caring for the bereaved includes inviting them to share meals or coffee, or stronger beverage, with us and responding to their invitations to do the same. Some Cruse Branches arrange Sunday lunch time groups and encourage shared meals at Christmas time. Sadly many widows find fewer invitations coming their way after the husband's death and we need to do all we can to encourage people to keep them, and widowers, on the guest list or make sure the habit of popping in for a cuppa is maintained.

Caring for the bereaved includes encouraging them to invite others in for a meal or drink and being around to bolster the shaking confidence before and to share the sense of achievement afterwards.

Caring for the bereaved also includes providing some tools for the job. Cruse's Fact Sheet **'Household Guide for Widowers'** is a useful tool. We hope the new **Cookery Book,** to be published next year as one of the features of our Silver Jubilee, will be another. It will have a number of distinctive features, including local and regional recipes for all over Britain, but above all it will be an encouragement to cook and share.

In the ancient Old Testament story, out of which came the name of Cruse, the breakthrough for the widow and her bereaved son came when they shared food with another person.

We want our new Cookery Book to be original and readers can help by sending in a favourite regional local recipe or menu, especially one dug out of the memory or with unusual — but edible — features. Please send them to Cruse House.

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In grief there is a retreat into the internal familiar world, a partial reflection of the very world the refugee has lost. It is the new adopted country that begins to appear callous and unappreciative of the needs of the dead man. Funeral customs comfort those left alive. They are also procedures to aid the dead person. Prayers, consecrated ground, proper conduct: they provide a ritual allowing the dead to become "forever gone".

Special divination is commonly involved in choosing the grave site and Mui's elderly mother wanted the grave to be dug pointing south. The cemetery superintendent pointed to the alignment of the other plots on the hillside and said it could only be south east. In vain the family pleaded and then they wandered off to survey the cemetry. Some land laid aside and consecrated for Roman Catholics was a better choice, the elderly mother said. The superintendent said that only unconsecrated ground was available. The family was evidently worried that the man's soul and body would not get the full benefit of a proper final rest. The grave should not remain unmarked, but to their consternation the vast amount this burial was costing would not include a gravestone. Was the superintendent certain that the site of the grave would not become lost? He replied that wooden crosses and concrete headstones were not allowed, but the family could make their own gravestone, so long as they used marble or Portland stone.

Culture betrayed

Perhaps it is common to most cultures that a man is not "dead" until he is buried. We cannot know whether the compromise here achieved has laid the dead man's soul and his widow's mind to rest. A key rite of passage improperly done, and the refugee can turn neither to the sanctuary of the mother culture which feels so betrayed nor can she find comfort in this new strange set of procedures. She remains dislocated.

The refugee worker must operate in this possibly unsatisfactory dialogue between cultures much of the time. The worker's understanding of language and behaviour often lacks the finer interpretation of the silent inner world of practice and custom. Interpreters have to cope with the grossness of the translation, the clumsy transliteration that attempts to satisfy one or other party, but seldom both.

Still dislocated

Mui, as an adult refugee, had internalised the funeral practices of her Sino-Vietnamese culture. The experience of flight from Vietnam and resettlement in Britain witnessed the loss of most of the external expressions of her sense of identity. Now with her husband dead she must also make the step from wife to widow. She must grieve for her husband when her grief for her homeland was not completed. And amidst this personal trauma a vital rite of passage spoiled by unhappy compromise. Mui remains dislocated, and will perhaps never settle as a widow in the way that, as a wife, she might have succeeded.

Taken with permission from an article in **Social Work Today,** 30.6.81.

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Printed by E. H. Baker & Co. Ltd., 86 Lower Mortlake Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 2JH. Ref. 71685