

The Yucatecan culture is strongly ingrained in death. One of the most evident indicators of this statement is the high number of suicides and their increment in the last decade. The national rate of suicide in Mexico is four suicides for each 100,000 inhabitants, while in the state of Yucatan this figure is nine suicides, with prevalence in the rural areas. Said otherwise, in the southeast area of the country, which has an important Mayan cultural background, a different perspective of life and death is observed with regard to the rest of the country. Another manifestation of this tendency toward death is the large number of beliefs, rituals and funeral customs that have a strong impact on the daily life of the Yucatecans, both in the rural areas and in the city. What relationship does this have with their cultural attitudes toward life and death? The present work, developed from the anthropological and psychological perspective presents various excerpts or short "flashes" of the life and death concepts in a Mayan community in Yucatan Mexico. This work has been a challenge for me since it breaks with the traditional role and training that I have in medicine and psychiatry. For the first time there were no rules, no comforts, nor office and air conditioning, because I left behind the rigid biochemical framework, and I decided to explore the social aspects of life and death. That decision meant that I went directly into the hot, tropical environment and experienced the reality of a contemporary, rural Mayan community with many "different" ways to understand life and death. The experience confronted my western knowledge and beliefs with another way to think, feel and act about the beginning and the end.

CONCLUSIONS:

After this brief look at the attitudes toward life and death in a small community with strong Mayan influence, it is necessary to make some concluding comments. At this time, only remains of what was a great Mayan civilization remain. Putting aside the archaeological monuments, which are silent witnesses of a savage destruction, the only things that remain of a destroyed culture are a broken language, economic and social marginization, the proliferation of alcohol, drugs and the imposition of a political system which supposedly will help the Mayan people integrate to the "modern" society. In the middle of this complexity, their attitudes toward life and death have transformed and as part of the daily, chaotic situation, the search for death is much a desperate option. The Mayan today live in social control, dominated by the State and the Catholic Church. In the recent North American "Free Trade Agreement", there is no room or alternatives made for the Mayans. Said in another way, the Mayans today live another form of extermination: the imposition of globalization, designed in foreign universities, blueprints of a "progress" that little or nothing has to offer the ethnic minorities. The present-day economic circumstances of Mexico are the result of 20 years or more of government policy and economics which are making the wealthy richer and at the same time are a silent death for a culture that for over five centuries is living a daily process of death. The Catholic church is the best alliance that the State can have, and as a result of this partnership, together they impose ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Once again, power is imposed and justified over the Mayan people in the name of God. Under the programs to build "love for the poor indigenous people", racist and discriminatory attitudes are hidden. Only a few months ago (July 2000) a representative of the Vatican was in Yucatan and he visited one of the Mayan archaeological sites. It was a sunny day there, in Chichen Itza, when the media recorded his ridicule and sarcasm. According to the Mayan, the shadow of Kukulcán, ("the feathered serpent"), descends the stairs of the most famous pyramid two times a year during what is called the "equinox". When the tour guide told them about a Mayan prophecy, which relates that a bearded man (the Spaniards) would come to their lands, the Vatican representative said, "For sure they were waiting for Santa Claus". In a similar way, another sarcastic comment was made when the tour was hearing the explanations of how the human sacrifices were done in the sacred underground well. This time the man is quoted as having asked, "With all this heat, did they throw them in dressed or nude?" The Maya are looked down on in Yucatan, and the very people of Mayan origin have developed strategies in order to be more accepted in their own land and to be able to survive. For this reason many Mayans change their last name to an Spanish equivalent. On the other hand, everything Maya is part of a very strong marketing strategy used to sell the Yucatan to the world. The images of the majestic Mayan pyramids are well-known to many. With them, opportunists distort historical facts, which are manipulated and deformed in order to tell fantastic stories that impress the tourist. In addition, the image of a "Mayan World" is sold, including such things as hotels with Mayan names, and restaurants and bars with exotic foods and drinks. All is part of a huge lie because Yucatan is not a "world", nor is it of the Mayas. The people of true Maya origin rarely have access to these beautiful installations and marvelous beaches, and if they do, it is only as humble waiters or fishermen that live off the tips of tourists. In the middle of this marvelous marketing, the reality is one of poverty, ignorance and health problems for the Mayans in Yucatan. I ask myself if the image of Ixtab, the Goddess of Suicide, and Christ, are a partnership in the offer to avoid suffering. In this link (Ixtab and Christ), we can find some explanation of suicidal behavior. The Mayan concept of life and death has suffered diverse transformations over time, but it is not an exaggeration to say that in the last 500 years the construction of these images has been done from the perspective of a culture which is dominated by the powerful. As in centuries before, this culture has been denied the most basic rights that are in contradiction with the publicity of respecting human dignity. In addition to the Goddess of Suicide, Ixtab, the image of a suffering Christ has been manipulated, using religious authoritarianism for an

efficient social control. The actual Mayan people have the images of Ixtab and of Christ, images which I insist have much to do in the construction of their attitudes toward life and death. Both pagan and Christian, these images are the basic structures of what I would like to call MayanChristianism, the religiousness that we observe today in the rural zones of Yucatan. Ixtab's influence is evident from prehispanic times to the present due to the fact that hanging is the most frequent form of suicide in Yucatán. This practice is much higher in the rural areas, and particularly among those with a strong indigenous origin. This situation is even clearer if we take into account the fact that in nearly every home in the rural areas there are rifles which are used for hunting and for protecting property. Why then is hanging preferred over shooting oneself? In addition to those words of Bishop Landa during the colonization of Yucatan, Quijada (hispanic observer) is quoted as saying in the 16th century, "The Indians that wanted to escape from the torture that the religious wanted to impose on them, fled to the rush and hung themselves so that they did not suffer and die like their companions." (Peniche, Roldán: 1999 page 12). The news media in the capital of the Yucatan informs the community about at least two suicides every week in a state which has a population of a million and one half inhabitants. The articles appear in what might be called the "police section" of the newspaper. About this, it is important to ask ourselves, "Why are articles about suicide published in this section? Why does suicide appear next to articles reporting crime?" The investigation of suicide in Yucatan and the preventive strategies cannot ignore the social, anthropological and psychological facts involved in this phenomena. Nonetheless, there is a strong tendency in recent years, especially in psychiatry, to explain suicide by focusing only on depression and the genetic and biochemical bases of behavior. This simplified approach to suicide, complicates the strategies for its prevention. Suicide a multifactorial problem with an important cultural and religious. If we see only the top of the iceberg, we are missing the complete picture. We need a holistic approach to study, understand, prevent and deal with suicide. This requires the participation of multidisciplinary teams. Only in this way we are going to successfully understand the multiple faces and images of life and death.