Suicide and Agency

Transforming social relations
Overview

- Background to suicide in Sri Lanka and the locality
- Kinship and the circle of dependency
- Social agency vs individual/collective vulnerability
- Premeditated suicide
- Spontaneous self-harm / Ikman Kopaye
Suicide in Sri Lanka

- Sri Lanka has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, and in 1995 recorded the highest rate with 48 deaths per 100,000

- In the first 6 months of 2007, 286 acts of self-harm (defined as attempted suicide) were recorded in Matara district alone (Chandrasena 2008)
Kinship and Suicide

- Acts of suicide and self-harm are locally understood to target close kin – and those involved attempt to determine who is responsible – “By establishing ‘who’, ‘why’ is also taken care of.” (Widger 2012: 2)

- Suicide may encompass inter-changing dualities; the transfer of shame from the victim to close kin, the restoration of honour through a ‘dishonourable act’, and the transfer of vulnerability from the individual to the family (Said 2013).
Structures of Kinship

- Blood kin and non-blood kin
- These are defined by ‘open’ or ‘instilled’ obligations
- The dominant family network as the village political structure
- Moral integrity – based on respect and keeping the domestic affairs out of the public eye (Said 2013).
Train suicide

- Premeditated and seen as a last resort
- Symbolic and metaphorical aspects
- Bio-power – the body is used as a stage - acts of suicide and self-harm are a transgression of boundaries between public and private domains (Linos 2010).
Self-harm using agrochemicals

- Used as a threat – the body becomes a political tool that embodies domestic space

- Bio-power – violence inflicted on the body becomes representative / embodies an attack on the structures of kinship – it becomes a source of local political leverage

- Acts of self-harm and suicide challenge structures of dependency or further enhance them
Conclusion

- To what extent are suicides conscious acts of social agency as opposed to social discourses of deteriorating kin relations?