



RELIGION AND SUICIDE IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Kevin E. Early



 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

Religion and Suicide
in the
African-American Community

**Recent Titles in
Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies**

The Poet's Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire

Josaphat B. Kubayanda

Tradition and Modernity in the African Short Story: An Introduction to a Literature in Search of Critics

F. Odun Balogun

Politics in the African-American Novel: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison

Richard Kostelanetz

Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women

Patricia Morton

Black Journalists in Paradox: Historical Perspectives and Current Dilemmas

Clint C. Wilson II

Dream and Reality: The Modern Black Struggle for Freedom and Equality

Jeannine Swift, editor

An Unillustrious Alliance: The African American and Jewish American Communities

William M. Phillips, Jr.

From Exclusion to Inclusion: The Long Struggle for African American Political Power

Ralph C. Gomes and Linda Faye Williams, editors

Mental and Social Disorder in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of Sierra Leone, 1787–1900

Leland V. Bell

The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin

Jean-François Gounard; Joseph J. Rodgers, Jr., translator

Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps

Kirkland C. Jones

A Struggle Worthy of Note: The Engineering and Technological Education of Black Americans

David E. Wharton

African American Soldiers in the National Guard: Recruitment and Deployment During Peacetime and War

Charles Johnson, Jr.

Religion and Suicide in the African-American Community

KEVIN E. EARLY

Forewords by
RONALD L. AKERS
and
ROBERT DAVIS

Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 158



GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Early, Kevin E.

Religion and suicide in the African-American community / Kevin E.

Early ; forewords by Ronald L. Akers and Robert Davis.

p. cm.—(Contributions in Afro-American and African studies, ISSN 0069-9624 ; no. 158)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-313-28470-9 (alk. paper)

1. Afro-Americans—Suicidal behavior. 2. Afro-Americans—Religion. 3. Suicide—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title. II. Series.

HV6545.5.E37 1992

362.2'8'08996073—dc20 92-19425

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1992 by Kevin E. Early

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-19425

ISBN: 0-313-28470-9

ISSN: 0069-9624

First published in 1992

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright Acknowledgments

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge permission to use copyrighted material.

Permission to reprint "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide" by Etheridge Knight granted by Broadside Press.

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright materials in this book, but in some instances this has proven impossible. The author and publisher will be glad to receive information leading to more complete acknowledgments in subsequent printings of the book and in the meantime extend their apologies for any omissions.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
 This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask.

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Tables	xi
Foreword by Ronald L. Akers	xiii
Foreword by Robert Davis	xv
Preface	xix
Acknowledgments	xxi
Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework	1
Theories of Suicide	3
Differences in Black and White Suicide Rates	8
Two Perspectives on Suicide	12
Religion as a Suicide Buffer in the African-American Community	18
Chapter 2. The Role of the Church	23
General Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values Regarding Suicide	23
The Centrality of the Church in the African-American Community	25

The Black Church and the Black Family	30
The Church's Definition of Suicide	34
Condemnation of Suicide	36
There is Always Hope	38
Views on the Causes of Suicide, and Why the Suicide Rate Among Blacks Is Relatively Low	40
Suicide is a "White Thing"	42
Summary	45
Chapter 3. Black Suicide, Drugs, and Crime	47
Summary	64
Chapter 4. Survey of Church Members	67
Chapter 5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications	75
The Influence of the Church in the African-American Community	76
Perceptions of Substance Abuse and Suicide	79
Perceptions of Suicide in the African-American Community	80
Conclusions	83
Appendix A: Letter of Introduction	95
Appendix B: Explanation of Study Letter	96
Appendix C: Interview Schedule	97
Appendix D: Vignettes	98
Appendix E: Survey	101

Appendix F: Informed Consent	104
Appendix G: Survey Results	105
Appendix H: Methodology	115
References	121
Index	127

This page intentionally left blank

Tables

1.1	Suicide Rates Per 100,000 According to Sex, Race, and Age, 1950–1989	10
1.2	Suicide Rates Per 100,000 According to Race and Sex, 1970–1989	12
4.1	Role of the Church in the African-American Community	69
4.2	Religious Norms Concerning Suicide	71

This page intentionally left blank

Foreword

Ronald L. Akers
University of Florida

One of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, showed us long ago that the ultimate private act, suicide, does not result solely from private, pathological factors. He focused on social forces in suicide as part of his efforts to define social facts, *sui generis*, as the core of the discipline of sociology. Suicide has remained one of the defining issues in sociology. In addition, it continues to be a major social problem for which society seeks answers and solutions. Media attention to suicide contagion among teenagers, the right-to-die movement, and notorious cases of doctor-assisted suicide have kept the problem of suicide in the public eye. We want to know not only about social forces that promote suicide, but about social structures and processes that may counter or prevent suicide.

Kevin E. Early's study has implications for understanding suicide both as a central sociological issue and as an important social problem. He turns our attention to answering the question of why black suicide rates have been and remain so low compared to white suicide rates. As he reminds us, the probability of white Americans taking their own lives, in spite of some recent increases in suicides among younger black males, is about twice that of African Americans. Why should this be? Many of the indicators of anomie, deprivation, desperation, and hopelessness, which one line of theory proposes are factors in suicide, are high in the African-American community. This

community does suffer disproportionately as victims and perpetrators of crime and drug abuse. Yet it does not suffer disproportionately from suicide. What characteristics of the black community relatively insulate it from suicide, and why do these characteristics seem not to insulate it as much from other social problems?

These are the powerful and important questions to which Early seeks relevant answers. He makes no claims to definitive conclusions. His is an exploratory study in one community, and there are other acknowledged limitations of the research. Nevertheless, he offers intriguing findings in support of the hypothesis that the religiously based normative climate in the black community acts as a buffer against suicide. He also uncovers in his interviews with black pastors and a survey of their congregations subtle variations in this climate regarding crime and drug abuse.

Whether readers agree or disagree with the theory, methodology, or conclusions of this study, it will command their attention. It is an important contribution to our knowledge of suicide. Sociologists and interested nonsociologists alike will find this book to be a valuable resource.

Foreword

Robert Davis

North Carolina A&T State University

Between the time of the publication of the pioneering work of Charles Prudhomme, "The Problem of Suicide in the American Negro" (1938)¹ to Kevin E. Early's *Religion and Suicide in the African-American Community*, there have been few informative and sociologically useful interpretations of suicide within the black community. Historically, suicide among blacks has never been a real and serious concern for the handful of sociologists and psychiatrists specializing in suicide research. Only a few behavior scientists' careers have touched the lives of suicidal black people. The explanations offered by these researchers are at best patronizing, depicting the weakness of the black family, a history of authority problems with the police, retroflective anger, and other distorted psychosocial patterns as being central factors in black suicide. This paucity of empirical studies designed to evaluate theories about causes of black suicide has been accompanied by a general lack of suicide prevention programs and strategies targeted specifically at the black community.

Why have research scholars and behavioral scientists ignored self-destructive behavior in the black community? Many argue that the reason is because of the lower rates of completed suicide among blacks. However, I suspect that the answer lies in the political nature of research funding and the fact that suicide among blacks