The Word Denied

"Civilization" is driving the Guarani to suicide.

Ten people had killed themselves in the first ten months of the year. That was a shocking toll for Caarapo, a rural community of 3,200 Kaiowa Guarani Indians in the western Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Just as shocking was the tender age of some of the victims. The youngest was Fortunata Escobar, ten years old.

When she died, Fortunata's father had been away for more than a month, working for a distillery. Her mother had died of natural causes earlier in the year.

Eight brothers and sisters were staying by themselves in the family's rustic hut. Alone in the house with a four-year-old sister one August day, Fortunata stung herself up by the neck from a roof pole.

I wanted to find out why.

"I don't know," said Lourdes Escobar, Fortunata's oldest sister. Lourdes, twenty, wore bright lipstick, a new-looking red blouse, and a tight black skirt that was also fairly new looking. She had on a wristwatch, too. I wondered where she got money for this stuff, but there she was, all dressed up with nowhere to go on a sultry Saturday afternoon, standing in the open doorway of the family's new home. It was the same kind of hut, with thatched roof and dirt floor, as the one they had moved from to escape "bad spirits" after Fortunata's death.

Obviously uncomfortable answering a stranger's questions about a painful matter, Lourdes kept her answers brief. She said Fortunata hadn't seemed upset or sad. Could she have heard about other people hanging themselves and tried it herself in play? "I think so," Lourdes told me, but I wasn't convinced. And even if Fortunata's death could be explained as a copycat suicide, that didn't account for the alarming number of other Indians who had killed themselves.

Since 1990, a suicide epidemic has afflicted not only Caarapo but several other communities of Guarani-speaking Indians, members of the Kaiowa and Nandeva tribes, in the southern end of Mato Grosso do Sul. Since 1986, some 400 Kaiowa have committed suicide—51 in 2003 alone. In a Guarani population of about 30,000, that translates into a rate of 170 suicides per 100,000 people.

By comparison, the annual suicide rate among Navajos living on U.S. reservations is 17 per 100,000 population, according to a U.S. Indian Health Service report based on 1987-1989 data. Nationwide, the U.S. rate is about 12 per 100,000, and Brazil's is less than 4 per 100,000, according to 1991 statistics.

Obviously, something was deeply and desperately wrong in Mato Grosso do Sul. I went to Caarapo knowing that I probably would not find a clear and simple explanation for the tragic phenomenon but hoping for some understanding beyond what I had learned from articles in the Brazilian press.

I did background reading from a folder of news clippings and other documents on file in the Los Angeles Times' Rio bureau, with its picture-window view of yacht-sprinkled Guanabara Bay and the city's famous hillside favelas. Most analysts agreed that the Guarani suicides are related to a breakdown of old cultural patterns and a failure to adjust to new ones. Throughout the Americas, numerous native cultures are crumbling under the onslaught of outside pressures and influences. The toll in human suffering and degradation is often dramatic, but none more so than the Guarani suicides.
Brazil has a total of 250,000 to 300,000 Indians in many language and cultural groups. The Guarani are the largest group, but it is now tiny compared to their numbers centuries ago. Guarani-speaking peoples once dominated a large region of South America extending from northern Argentina through Paraguay and deep into southern Brazil. The total estimated Guarani population when the Spanish and Portuguese came to South America in the 1500s was two million.

Today, about 25,000 of the 30,000 Guarani Indians of the Kaiowa and Nandeva tribes in Mato Grosso do Sul live on 22 small reservations scattered over rolling plains of red earth that once was forested but now is mostly farm fields and pasture. Much of their land is overgrown with a deep-rooted weed called coloniao that crowds out food crops and is stubbornly resilient. The Guarani's farming methods are rudimentary, and the soils are weak from heavy use.

A 1993 study by Brazilian social researcher Olivio Mangolin says Guarani Indians occupied 40 percent of the territory in Mato Grosso do Sul two centuries ago but now are left with less than 1 percent, about 53,000 acres. “Today these small reservations continue to be invaded, their sacred territories exploited by big land-grabbers,” Mangolin wrote. I knew from previous reporting that this was true of Indians elsewhere in Brazil, but it didn’t explain why the Guarani have such an extraordinarily high suicide rate.

Communities that once lived by hunting, fishing, and subsistence farming are ruinously crowded onto reservations that don’t have enough land for that kind of life. Cities have sprung up nearby, tempting the natives with consumer goods and urban diversions. Alcohol distilleries, which produce fuel from sugarcane to supplement gasoline in Brazil, recruit Guarani men for cane-cutting and other menial, low-wage jobs. Some women find work in town as domestic servants, some girls as prostitutes. Alcoholism has become widespread.

As the old ways of the Guarani have faded, their disorientation has increased. As their need for commercial goods has grown, their awareness of their poverty has sharpened. Family unity has weakened, community life has wilted, religious meaning has waned.

“For the Guarani, their life is not a life worth living,” said Antonio Brand, a Brazilian historian who has done extensive research on Guarani culture. The collapse of the traditional Guarani economy, Brand explained, has meant the collapse of traditional religious life, because every act in the process of making a living from the land was a religious ritual. It is impossible to separate the economy from the religion, as we do in our culture,” he said. Brand told me that the Guarani have been losing their ancestral forest lands for centuries, but that the most devastating deforestation began in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, large-scale soybean planting for the export market dealt a final blow to the forests of Mato Grosso do Sul. “Finally, there were no more trees,” Brand said disgustedly. “It is totally deforested. It is a crime.”

For the Guarani, the crime may be lethal. Mauricio Souza Vilalba, a Guarani-speaking university student, said that because they no longer have enough land for their traditional lifestyle, “the people are being pulled away from their roots.” Without those roots, life as the Guarani know it is difficult to live.

I met Mauricio in Dourados, a city about 40 miles north of Caarapó. He is active in the regional chapter of a Roman Catholic Church agency called the Indigenous Missionary Council, or CIMI, that does social and educational work among the Guarani. Hoping that more outside interest in the suicide epidemic would
He said the use of hanging or poison in almost all Guarani suicides is a way of stopping the word, or spirit, from ascending through the throat. “The spirit stays on the ground, lost,” he said. It becomes a “bad spirit” that seeks company, inducing others to commit suicide.

Although suicide is not encouraged by the Guarani religion, he said, it is sometimes admired as a final act of valor in a life stripped of the traditional ways. “The Guarani wants to show that he is courageous. He needs to be admired.”

Guarani people also believe in hexes that can cause someone to commit suicide. Those whose lives do not follow tradition are considered to be vulnerable to such spells, said Mauricio, whose family is of Guarani origin.

We talked in an open shed at the back of the CIMI headquarters in Dourados, an old stucco house on a residential street. The shade of the shed took only a little of the wallop out of the afternoon heat. It was cooler when we left for Caarapo early the next morning. On the way, we drove across undulating plain, passing plowed fields and green pastures that reached the horizon. Here and there we saw clusters of zebu cattle, with their humped backs and sagging white hide. In Mato Grosso do Sul, Mauricio commented, a beef steer has a right to more land than an Indian does.

The Caarapo reservation is less than 9,000 acres of flat farmland, laced with dirt lanes that connect scattered huts made of rough planks, poles, and thatching. The bright heaviness of the day’s increasing heat seemed to emphasize the squalor of the fragile little dwellings as we drove the heavily rutted dirt road into the community at midmorning. The well-trodden yards of most homes were bare of vegetation, but green coloniai weeds choked roadside ditches and invaded fields, standing several feet high where it was left uncut. A few chickens, skinny dogs, and people were out and about in the lanes and fields, but there was no farm machinery to be seen, no cars or trucks. By Latin American standards, I quickly saw, this was rural poverty at its basic level.
The first person Mauricio introduced me to was Assunção Gonçalves, 36, who was hoeing patches of coloniá weed from a field near his ramshackle home. Gonçalves came to Caarapo after repeated attempts to recover land on a ranch where his family had lived for generations. He and a few other Guarani tried to occupy the land three times, but each time, the police came and forced them to leave.

"I was born there," he said. "My mother, my grandparents, my great-grandparents all died there."

Gonçalves was wearing torn pants over worn-out boots and a tattered cap over uncut hair and scraggly beard. He and his wife have had seven children, but three have died of illnesses. He said many children in Caarapo are sick and hungry. Four had died in the past few months from eating spoiled food scavenged from the garbage dump of a neighboring town, also called Caarapo.

The twelve-year-old daughter of a neighbor committed suicide the year before, Gonçalves said. The father was away working at an alcohol distillery, and the girl’s stepmother had scolded her one day, “called her lazy.” The stepmother went out, “and when she came back, the girl was hanging in the house,” Gonçalves said. The family burned the house and moved away “because of the bad spirits.”

Mauricio helped Gonçalves hoe coloniá for a while. Then we went looking for Jorge Paulo, Caarapo’s cacique, or religious chief. We found him with his wife at the home of her sister. Paulo, 77, was wearing a straw hat, a black pin-striped suit jacket over a yellow t-shirt, and a pair of white rubber boots. He offered a variety of explanations for the suicide epidemic. In the cases of several youths who have killed themselves, he cited familial neglect: “Sometimes the father doesn’t work, doesn’t help his child. The child goes hungry at home and doesn’t have a lunch to take to school.”

The cacique said a widespread neglect of religious practice and prayer also leads to suicides. “If there are 1,000 Indians, only 8 or 9 remember God,” he said. “Nande Ru is angry.”

I asked him what the community could do to stop the suicides. “We would have to spend a whole day, two days, to pray and bap-

ize the earth,” he said. “In a year, two or three years, it wouldn’t happen anymore.”

Silvio Paulo, the community’s capitão, or political leader, had other explanations for the suicides. He said alcohol often is involved, but that the drinking is caused by “a sickness of the spirit. People are desperate.”

And the sickness seems to be contagious. Young people who have gone to see the body of a suicide victim sometimes commit suicide themselves soon after.

“Before, they didn’t go to see the bodies. Only older people did,” Silvio Paulo said outside his home, a bigger shack than most in the community but still made of the customary rough slats, planks, and sticks. The walls were flimsy, loosely fitted, unpainted, and full of unchinked cracks. “Today, children, youths, everyone goes.”

Increased contact with city life has undermined Guarani customs, he said. “Children go to school, and they go to the city. They want diversions, they want shoes, they want watches.” They become frustrated because they cannot afford many of those things. At the same time, traditional pastimes, such as hunting and fishing, have been lost.

But what is most lacking is religious practice and religious leadership, according to the capitão, who criticized the cacique for failing to teach and inspire religious faith.

“He no longer makes true prayers,” Silvio Paulo said, not hiding his disapproval. “He’s getting old. He doesn’t bring people

A long time ago a Juruna visited Siná, the first Juruna. Siná was married to a huge spider that made dresses. Siná was very old, all white, but he became young again each time he took a bath, pulling his skin off over his head like a sack. After Siná asked how his people were, he took his guest to the top of a large rock, from which the Juruna could be seen down below, fishing in their canoes. Finally Siná showed the Juruna visitor an enormous forked stick that supported the sky and said, “The day our people die out entirely, I will pull this down, and the sky will collapse, and all people will disappear. That will be the end of everything.”

—Orlando Villas Boas and Claudio Villas Boas, Xingu: The Indians, Their Myths
together anymore. People don’t get together anymore to sing.”

It is clear that there is no single, simple explanation for the Guarani suicides. “There are a series of factors that add up,” said historian Brand, who was preparing a doctoral thesis on the Guarani. Changes in economic and social patterns have had a magnified psychological impact on the Guarani because of their deeply mystical and sentimental nature, he said. “The supernatural is permanently involved in their spiritual life. They are fantastic people. Personal relations, family relations, kinship relations are fundamental in their day-to-day lives,” and the breakdown in these ties can be devastating, he said.

Gonçalves Araujo, nineteen, was caught between the old ways and the new reality of the Guarani. He married Marta Martins when she was twelve and moved into his mother-in-law’s household, as is the Guarani custom.

But Araujo went off to work for a distillery with a friend, Pedro Paulo Benites. Benites said the two returned after 50 days with money in their pockets, but by the time Araujo settled an old grocery store debt and bought some more food, his money was gone.

Araujo started drinking and kept at it for two days, Benites said. On the second day, his wife gave birth to a premature and sickly boy. Shortly after the baby was born, Araujo told his wife that he was going to go sleep in a thatch-roofed shed near his mother-in-law’s house. Benites, a lean but sturdy young man, showed me where his friend’s body was later found hanging in the shed.

“I guess he was angry because his baby was going to die,” said Benites. The baby died a week later, the day I visited the family with Mauricio. The infant’s body, wrapped in rags, was lying in a makeshift crib on the dirt floor of his grandmother’s hut. Marta, the thirteen-year-old mother, appeared to be in shock. In the bright sun outside, she stared blankly when I asked her about her husband’s suicide. As I drove away, Mauricio told me that the girl seemed likely to commit suicide herself.

“She will hang herself, almost certainly,” he predicted.

The Yanomami had always been there, shaman Davi Kopenawa Yanomami said, and had never moved away. “The Indian existed here before you came, before your father or mother existed,” he said. “He does not come from another country. The first Yanomami is our creator, Omam. We were born here; Omam raised us and left us here. Then the Yanomami grew great and scattered over this land. Omam created everything, even you.” Similarly, he said, the white did not discover Brazil, because it always existed, along with the Indians, its first inhabitants.

There are four main Yanomami groups, speaking different languages, each with its own dialect. The myth of creation perpetuated in this particular group of Yanomami said that the world was made of three superimposed layers. Originally there were only two, but the top one became old and worn, a large piece of it fell, taking with it two men. One of them was Omam, and he fathered Yanomami people when he was fishing in a stream and pulled out a woman. She did not, however, have genitalia, only a tiny hole, “like the anus of a hummingbird.” Omam took the teeth of a piranha and cut out genitalia, after which he had many children.

The whites and other races were made from the foam or mist that lay along the river. A large bird pushed the foam to the shore and formed it into men, and the shading of the foam reflected the different colors of the human race.

I asked him to tell me more about Omam. “Omam is good for us,” he said. “He is our chief. He is not like the gold prospector. He does not destroy the earth and the forest, he does not ruin the river, he doesn’t look for gold. He doesn’t bring sickness to kill others. Omam is respect, he loves us very much. He likes the Indian and the forest. Omam is very wise, not like the Brazilian government.

“It cannot see,” Davi said, “because it is blinded by the gleam of gold.”

—Augusta Dwyer, Into the Amazon: The Struggle for the Rain Forest