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POWER, GENDER, AND THE SOCIAL MEANING OF AGUARUNA SUICIDE

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The Aguaruna, a Jivaroan people of the Peruvian Amazon, experience a very high rate of suicide. The epidemiology of Aguaruna suicide suggests that suicide is part of a complex social process linking death threats, homicide, assertions of personal autonomy and relations of domination. Some segments of Aguaruna society—specifically, women and young men, who are unable to organise collective responses to conflict—use solitary acts of violence directed against the self to express anger and grief, as well as to punish social antagonists. Their suicidal actions inadvertently serve to reproduce the very relations of dominance and subordination that make self-destruction a compelling behavioural option.

No matter how much one knows about what is clinically called ‘self-damaging behaviour’, the fact of a suicide—the confrontation with an actual case of a known person wilfully and violently withdrawing from life—poses an existential riddle stunning in its opaqueness. At times such as this, and probably only at times such as this, one is inclined to agree with the sententious assertion of Camus that ‘there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide’.

The Aguaruna of Peru’s Amazonian region confront this issue regularly. Among the Aguaruna, suicide or the possibility of suicide accompanies public expressions of grief and anger. It figures prominently in the subtle power struggles between men and women. Like homicide and sorcery accusations, suicide can precipitate major realignments of social relations. It is a factor in the social reproduction of political arrangements in Jivaroan society.

In this essay I focus on two general aspects of Aguaruna suicide: suicidogenic social forces of the sort identified by Durkheim and the social meaning of suicide within the Aguaruna milieu. The question of the social meaning of suicide needs to be addressed because, as critics of Durkheimian approaches (Douglas 1968; Atkinson 1978) have pointed out, the situations alleged to cause suicide might just as well produce other kinds of deviant behaviour. It is not at all clear ‘why suicide in particular, rather than some other course of action, is a likely consequence of the particular structural condition posited as the independent variable’ (Atkinson 1978: 14–15). The principal questions I shall ask are: (1) Why do the Aguaruna have such a high suicide rate, or more precisely, why do they frequently respond to personal crises with self-destructive acts? (2) Why do women and young men kill themselves much more frequently than adult men? I shall argue that the complex etiology of Aguaruna suicide demands a multi-

dimensional interpretive strategy that takes into account such factors as gender ideology, ideas of self, and culture-specific stress points in the individual life cycle.

Ethnographic background

The Aguaruna are a group of approximately 25,000 tribal horticulturalists and hunters who live in the rugged upland forest of the Departments of Amazonas, San Martín, and Loreto in northern Peru. They are culturally similar to the neighbouring Huambisa and Shuar (or Jívaro proper), as well as the Achuar and Mayna Shuar. Despite the rapid social change that has followed highway construction, colonisation, missionary activity and the introduction of schools (Siverts 1972; Brown 1984a), the Aguaruna retain a strong sense of shared cultural identity. They have successful inter-village political organisations, and many communities are now in possession of official land titles. While precarious in some respects, their current economic situation is more favourable than that of many other indigenous groups in contemporary Amazonia.

Anthropologists, linguists and missionaries who have lived with the Aguaruna consistently report a high rate of suicide, especially among women (Grover 1973; Siverts in press; Brown 1984b; Elois Ann Berlin, personal communication). Grover's field notes (1973), which have been made available on microfiche by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, include data on more than sixty suicides that took place between the late 1940's and the late 1960's in the Alto Río Marañón. Henning Siverts (in press) documents one Aguaruna suicide in great detail and provides brief accounts of half a dozen more, most of which occurred in the early 1970's.

My own field research in the Alto Río Mayo bears out the observations of Grover and Siverts. At least ten suicides that occurred between 1977 and 1981 came to my attention, and I recorded information on ten others that had happened prior to 1977. These data suggest a suicide rate of approximately 180 per 100,000 per year for the period 1977–81. (This is more than ten times higher than the suicide rate for England and Wales in the same period.) Such a high rate is not, however, without precedent in the ethnographic record (Webb & Willard 1975: 26; Johnson 1981: 326; Rubinstein 1983: 659).¹

One searches in vain for evidence of a similar suicide rate among neighbouring Jivaroan peoples or, to the best of my knowledge, elsewhere in Amazonia. Neither Ross (1976) nor Kroeger & Barbira-Freedman (1982) mention suicide in their discussion of mortality among Shuar and Achuar populations. Aside from brief allusions to suicide in Karsten (1935: 223) and Harner (1972: 181–2), the major ethnographic sources on the Jívaro are silent on the question. The apparent rarity of suicide in other Jivaroan groups makes the Aguaruna case seem all the more remarkable.²

The historical dimension of Aguaruna suicide is still not well understood. The Aguaruna of the Alto Mayo insist that suicide is a practice of recent origin or, in their words, 'something that people have just learned to do'. Nevertheless, ethnographic accounts by Tessman (1930: 362), Brüning (1928: 50) and Rivet (1908: 239) mention that female suicide was a part of Aguaruna life in the early

twentieth century, a time when contacts with non-Indians were still sporadic. None of these accounts has anything to say about suicide among Aguaruna men. I would argue that although female suicide has ample historical precedent, the evidence points to a rising female suicide rate. It seems likely that male suicide is either a recent phenomenon or one that was previously disguised as battle fatality when the Aguaruna were still engaged in inter-tribal warfare (cf. Harner 1972: 181).

Recent changes in the Aguaruna world may well have strengthened preexisting suicidal tendencies. The colonisation by non-Indians of land formerly available to the Aguaruna, the establishment of bilingual schools and Christian missions, the introduction of a cash economy, dramatic changes in settlement patterns—the now familiar litany of Amazonian ‘development’—all have created stresses within Aguaruna society. The values of senior men, who were brought up in a warrior culture, are inevitably different from those of their bilingual, literate sons, who are often more familiar with the ways of the town than the lore of the forest. The anomic experience of Aguaruna adolescent males is in many respects analogous to that of young Micronesians, who also have frequent recourse to suicide (Rubinstein 1983; Hezel 1984).

The impact of social change on women has less to do with intergenerational tension than with a wholesale devaluation of women’s skills. The traditional root-crops cultivated by women are now less important than the prestige cash-crops cultivated by men. People increasingly use pharmaceuticals rather than the herbal medicines formerly prepared by women. Moreover, women have generally been denied access to new positions of prestige. There are few women teachers, agricultural extensionists, health workers or politicians among the Aguaruna. As has been the case elsewhere in native South America (Buenaventura-Posso & Brown 1980), women are losing political ground in the neocolonial context, and an increasing female suicide rate may be one result.

Patterns of Aguaruna suicide

By combining my own field data from the Alto Río Mayo with the published field notes of Grover (1973), I have produced a sample of eighty-six suicides spanning a period from the late 1940’s to 1981. As deficient as the information on some of these cases may be, this is a large sample by ethnographic standards and one that allows me to make some cautious generalisations about how, when and where the Aguaruna take their own lives.

There is clear evidence that women kill themselves more frequently than men. The female/male suicide proportions for the combined sample are 2:1, while the ratio for the Alto Mayo alone is closer to 3:1. Suicide is thus predominantly, though by no means exclusively, a female act. Precise information on the age of suicide victims is unavailable since the registration of birth dates is only a recent practice. In general, though, male victims tend to be in their teens, female victims in their teens and early 20’s. The range of variability is much greater for women than it is for men, however; suicides of women in their 40’s or 50’s are not unknown, but in the sample there is not a single case of a middle-aged man killing himself.

TABLE I. Suicide methods employed by
Aguaruna Indians
(Source: Grover 1973; author's field notes
1976–78, 1981)

Men (n = 27)	
Firearms	48%
Poison	44%
Hanging	4%
No data	4%
Women (n = 59)	
Poison	85%
Hanging	8%
No data	7%

Table I summarises the suicide methods reported in the eighty-six cases. Use of firearms was restricted to men, while women were much more likely than men to kill themselves by poisoning. The choice of poisons is often startling. People have been known to swallow anything that might do them harm—insecticides, bleach and laundry detergents are common choices—when they try to kill themselves. The Aguaruna are familiar with several highly toxic plant species that are readily available in the nearby forest, so one must conclude that some suicides are sudden, impulsive acts rather than carefully planned exercises in self-destruction.

Because most self-inflicted deaths are the result of poisoning and the victim often is able to speak to others before dying, there is little chance that the episodes are really covert homicides.³ The Aguaruna view homicide as an eminently social act. In all the cases of actual homicide about which I have any information, the killers made no attempt to hide a murder from their close kinsmen, although they might dissemble in order to elude capture by the victim's relatives.

Stengel (1964) argues that one must be careful to distinguish between successful suicide and attempted suicide, or 'parasuicide' (Kreitman 1977). In Western societies, many failed suicides represent cries for help, unambiguous statements that the victim's present state is untenable. Among the Aguaruna, I heard of some suicide attempts that were patently symbolic in character—say, when an adolescent girl ate a small quantity of laundry detergent in the presence of her mother and sisters. The evidence suggests, though, that many failed suicides were serious attempts that might well have resulted in death. Since men use more lethal methods to kill themselves, they are more likely to die from suicidal acts than women, although their overall suicide rate is lower.

Case studies

Examination of a few case studies will help to link these general observations to the specific circumstances that produce them. Two of the following suicidal incidents are taken from my own notes; the third is an extract from Grover's field notes (1973). I have chosen these particular cases less because they are somehow 'typical' than because they illustrate the wide range of circumstances that can precipitate suicidal acts.

CASE 1. *Alto Naranjillo, Department of San Martín. June, 1978.*

Wampurái Peas killed herself by drinking the fish poison *timu* (probably *Lonchocarpus* sp.) At the time of her death she was approximately thirty years old and had five children ranging in age from one to fifteen.

Early one morning, Wampurái argued with her husband's sister, a woman with whom she normally enjoyed cordial relations. The fight started when the sister-in-law discovered that Wampurái's dog had killed a hen from her henhouse. After the argument, Wampurái went to her garden as usual, accompanied by her youngest daughter. They harvested manioc tubers, which they then carried to the river to be washed. While on the riverbank, Wampurái prepared and drank an infusion of *timu*. Apparently she had secretly obtained the *timu* from a place near her garden. Her daughter ran to the house to tell everyone that Wampurái had taken poison. She was brought back to the house, where she died several hours later.

Her relatives proposed various explanations for the suicide. There was no question that the immediate cause was that she had 'gotten angry at her dog' because of the incident with the hen. Some people argued that she was despondent because her sister-in-law's son had refused to marry her daughter, a union she strongly favoured. A few men proposed that she killed herself because she was pregnant by an adulterous liaison, but this opinion attracted little support because it was based on pure speculation.

This death remained mysterious to all of those affected by it. Curiously, in the extensive deliberations about her suicide no one mentioned the fact that Wampurái's husband Tugki was slowly dying of mucocutaneous leishmaniasis, an illness that prevented him from hunting or preparing gardens. Were it not for the presence of an adolescent son, who performed some male tasks, her situation would have been desperate. Prior to the suicide, she showed no obvious signs of ill humour or depression.

CASE 2. *Huascayacu, Department of San Martín. 1974.*

Kijk Jiukám's wife died of a chronic upper respiratory infection, probably tuberculosis, which was diagnosed as being sorcery-induced. During the funeral, her daughter (by a previous marriage) escaped notice long enough to drink a mixture of water and laundry detergent. At about the same time in another part of the community, the deceased woman's brother, a man in his early twenties, was also overcome with grief and drank a bottle of insecticide. The next day, both died.

Everyone who described the incident assumed that the deaths were caused by the victims' extreme grief and the inadvertent failure of others to deny them access to poison.

The dramatic expressions of grief seen in this case are not unusual. Following the death of an adult, close female relatives of the deceased are considered likely candidates for suicide. Their demonstrations of suicidal intent are to some degree a matter of social convention, but real suicides occur with enough frequency for suicide threats to be taken seriously. People keep a close watch on distraught relatives to make sure that no poisons are within their reach and that they are not left alone long enough to hang themselves. The Aguaruna generally associate grief-related suicide with women, yet the aggregate sample shows that extreme grief is also a significant factor in male suicides, as Case 2 illustrates.

CASE 3. [From Grover 1973: 58.] *Duship, Department of Amazonas. 1966.*

Orga Paati Takamanch. Fifteen yr . . . Took *barbasco* [fish poison]. Born at Kunchin. Her husband [name illegible] was sick (diarrhoea). He had come home from school. He was doing his fifth year in Nazaret. His fifteen year-old wife was stringing beads in a nearby house (Juan Atsú). When she walked in, he said in a scolding tone, 'Haven't you heard I'm sick? Why aren't you here taking care of me? Boil some water for me'. She turned round without answering him and walked out. He threw a piece of bark after her. When she didn't return, he went to look for her and found

her on the trail to the garden, returning after having chewed on *barbasco* root. He said, 'Why are you chewing that?' Took her to the river and made her drink water but it was too late. She died not long after. Was she involved in adultery?

This case from Grover's unedited notes resembles many other accounts of husband-wife confrontations that lead to suicide. The woman flees the house and takes fish poison in the forest. (This kind of fish poison is rarely cultivated near houses because of the fear that it will be used for suicidal purposes.) The final remark, 'Was she involved in adultery?' appears at the end of several of Grover's suicide reports, and apparently reflects the fact that her informants considered adultery a possible motive. Since no further information about adultery is given, it is likely that (as in Case 1) this is pure speculation on the part of Grover or her informants.

Local explanations of suicide motives

A refractory issue associated with the three case studies, and indeed with all suicides, is the interpretation of folk explanations of suicide motives. Durkheimian approaches to the analysis of suicide have tended to ignore survivors' accounts on the assumption that relatives of suicide victims may want to absolve themselves of blame. As problematic as these accounts may be, however, they are surely important social facts in their own right, and they make an important contribution to the reproduction of the social meanings of suicide in society. Atkinson (1978), who studied the process by which English coroners determine whether sudden deaths are suicides, argues convincingly that the attempt by the living to decipher the thinking of the dead is an important source of information on the social meaning of suicide. The theorising of coroners and other participants in inquests, he suggests, 'can be viewed as providing for the social organization of sudden deaths by rendering otherwise disordered and potentially senseless events ordered and sensible' (1978: 173). The accounts of people who survive suicide attempts are yet another source of information that is incorporated into commonsense theories of suicide. These ideas ultimately affect suicidal behaviour, since 'those who actually attempt and commit suicide are unlikely to be ignorant of the meanings commonly associated with suicide' (Atkinson 1978: 146).

The Aguaruna expend considerable energy to render suicide sensible in their own terms. Sometimes the task is relatively easy: before dying, the victim justifies his or her suicidal action, perhaps identifying a person whom the victim feels is to blame. Other deaths are more mysterious, requiring people to propose explanations that are then hotly debated. Since a major concern of survivors is to assess blame, there are often two irreconcilable opinions about what precipitated a suicide.

Table 2 lists events or situations that informants mentioned in order to explain seventy-five of the eighty-six suicides included in the sample. (Data on key events preceding 11 suicides were unavailable.) Where the case studies mention several events, I include all of them as if they were independent factors. It should be understood that I am concerned less with the question of why specific suicides occurred than with how the Aguaruna account for suicides in general. As I have

suggested, these ideas influence suicidal acts, although their impact on any *particular* suicide is mediated by the psychology and social circumstances of the actor.

TABLE 2. Key events preceding suicide according to survivors
(Sources: Grover 1973; author's field notes 1976–78, 1981)

	Men (n = 25)	Mentioned in % of cases
Drinking heavily at time of suicide		32
Said to be engaged in illicit love affair		28
Fought with kinsman		24
Publicly denounced for misbehaviour		20
Rejected by or denied access to potential wife		16
Grieving for dead relative		12
'Angered' by some mishap		4
Other (e.g., unexplained 'sadness', serious illness)		16
Women (n = 50)		
Argued with or physically abused by spouse/kinsman		48
Said to be engaged in illicit love affair		36
Drinking heavily at time of suicide		22
Husband formed polygynous household or claimed to love another woman		14
Abandoned by lover/spouse		8
Grieving for dead relative		8
Other (e.g., resisted arranged marriage, made 'crazy' by love magic)		12

Although table 2 shows that the circumstances perceived to be suicidogenic vary considerably, I can make a few generalisations without doing violence to the evidence. The Aguaruna tend to link male suicides to situations in which a young man is either denied access to a potential spouse or in which he is engaged in some behaviour that earns the disapproval of the community. Female suicides occur at a marital crisis: a woman is discovered committing adultery; she is abused or abandoned by her husband; she is forced into an arranged marriage; her husband takes a second wife. Among unmarried women, conflicts with close kinsmen produce the same result. Both men and women may have been drinking at the time of their suicide.

It must be emphasised that neither men nor women consider suicide a socially acceptable reaction to difficult circumstances. There may be a manifest cause for a suicide—some alleged mistreatment of the victim, or involvement in a scandal—but the latent cause is always said to be the victim's inferior thinking ability. I often heard people remark that a suicide victim under discussion was 'stupid' (*anentáimchau*, literally 'without thought') and therefore chose suicide over a socially appropriate response to difficulties.

On the basis of cross-cultural analysis, Naroll (1983: 208 sqq.) postulates a strong causal link between suicide and 'thwarting disorientation situations'. He defines the latter as a circumstance that 'combines unstable social ties with sources of displaced hostility'. Naroll further specifies that the broken social ties must be due to social forces rather than natural ones. For example, a woman whose husband is killed in battle is more likely to commit suicide than a woman whose husband is a victim of accidental drowning.

The elements of social disruption and hostility to which Naroll draws

attention are clearly evident in Aguaruna accounts of suicides, including the three case studies presented above. The victims' relations with close kinsmen have been seriously compromised, either because of an acrimonious dispute or, as in Case 2, through the sudden death of a family member. Case 3 indicates that a punitive or 'Samsonic' element—that is, a desire to punish the victim's tormentors for their actions (Jeffreys 1952)—may also be present. Yet we are still left with an ethnographic riddle: why is suicide the specific course of action taken?

The fact that the Aguaruna perceive most suicides to stem from social conflict suggests that the meaning of suicide is linked to issues of domination, personal power and control. 'Self-destruction', Giddens (1979: 149) writes, 'is a (virtually) always-open option, the ultimate refusal that finally and absolutely cancels the oppressive power of others. . . .' It remains to be seen how suicide figures in Aguaruna power relations. What does self-inflicted death signify and what does the strategic manipulation of that signification accomplish?

Death and the body politic

Descriptions of traditional Jivaroan social life stress its essentially atomistic nature. Extended households sharing the same longhouse or *jibaria* formed the most solidary units, though the exigencies of mutual defence and a more diffuse desire for sociability brought households together in loosely linked neighbourhoods, often of an endogamous character (Harner 1972; Descola 1981). The Alto Mayo Aguaruna today live in 'native communities' (*comunidades nativas*) consisting of relatively centralised settlements surrounded by agricultural fields and forest, which are held in common. Despite the change in settlement pattern, village solidarity is often fragile. When disputes break out, as they often do, the solidarity of the household and closely related cognatic kin transcends loyalty to a community or to any inter-village political entities.

Although people explain their residence in a particular community by reference to such things as closeness of blood ties, intermarriage and a prevailing spirit of co-operation—in other words, the positive aspects of social life—existing residence patterns are often created by death. The death of an adult prompts a reassessment of existing social relations and may ultimately lead to major social realignments. Deaths force people to evaluate the quality of their current social ties and to clarify them through increased solidarity with some parties and increased social distance from others.

Death is a social catalyst because deaths, especially sudden deaths, may be considered culpable homicides, even if no obvious force is involved. A murder, of course, puts the kinsmen of the victim on a war footing with the kinsmen of the killers. But fatal illnesses are seen as the work of sorcerers, who can be identified and assassinated. The surviving kinsmen of a suicide victim attempt to blame the death on someone who inflicted emotional injury on the deceased. Death is thus a force to be manipulated for political ends. Death threats, implicit or explicit, are part of political discourse in the Alto Mayo, and though they are now mostly employed for rhetorical effect, there are enough real killings in memory to ensure that such threats still carry weight. Learning when to threaten

and when to resist the temptation is an important part of political education among the Aguaruna.

Suicide as social action: the male perspective

From their teens, young men are taught the subtle calculus of sociability on the one hand and threats of physical violence on the other. They must avoid fights with close kinsmen, especially during drinking parties, where conflicts frequently ignite. At the same time, their fathers prepare them to direct their rage towards enemies when a death occurs—to avenge homicides, to pursue sorcerers doggedly when they kill one's kin. The ability of men to speak the language of force persuasively is largely determined by their age and position in the male life cycle. A mature man known to enjoy solidary relations with an extensive network of brothers, brothers-in-law, sons-in-law and nephews is taken seriously. Young single men, in contrast, reveal themselves as rash or foolish if they speak of using force, since they cannot back up their threats by mobilising a group of kinsmen and spurring them to action. Violence may be organised by an individual, but it is ultimately a collective process.

As was stated earlier, male suicide is limited to young men or adolescents facing a significant interpersonal crisis. Adult men respond to conflict by redefining themselves socially through the mobilisation of a supportive faction that can respond to opposition through public debate or, in extreme cases, violence. Yet male adolescents do not have the social capital that allows them to mobilise kinsmen effectively. They therefore face the unpleasant choice of either enduring humiliation in silence or responding to difficulties through solitary aggression against the self, a behaviour that Aguaruna men explicitly associate with women. Grover (1973: 46), in fact, reports a case in which the male kinsmen of a young suicide victim berated him as he died. 'How could you take poison like a woman?' they reportedly shouted at him during his death throes.

Let us compare two cases of social conflict, in one instance involving a middle-aged man, in the other an adolescent, to see how men respond to difficulties at different points in their life cycle:

CASE 4. Shampuyacu, Department of San Martín. 1977.

Arturo moved to the community of Shampuyacu after deciding that the deaths of his children while he lived in another community were due to sorcery. His relations with his new neighbours were cordial until the community decided to undertake a communal agricultural project to cultivate rice. Arturo preferred to maintain a more traditional subsistence economy and cared nothing for the production of cash crops. After failing to appear with his sons and sons-in-law at communal work sessions, several other men in the village decided that he should be punished for shirking his duties. He was called to a village meeting, criticised for non-co-operation, and placed in a village 'jail' (a small palm-wood and thatch structure) for several hours as punishment.

Enraged by this treatment, Arturo vowed to remove himself from the community as soon as possible. He reportedly also let it be known that any further insults would be repaid with physical force. His family began house construction in another community. As soon as they could, they moved to this new community permanently.

The head of a large household, Arturo transformed his anger into prompt social action. With the assistance of his sons and sons-in-law, he was able to

build a new house and make new gardens in a more remote area where he would not be bothered by community labour demands.

CASE 5. Huascayacu, Department of San Martín. 1975.

Katán struck one of his daughters for disobedience. This angered a teenaged son, who began to argue with Katán, at the same time loading a shell into his shotgun in a menacing way. Another brother sided with him, and together they beat Katán with their fists.

Katán brought his story to the village teacher, who insisted to the *apu* or headman (Katán's brother) that the two boys be brought forcibly to the schoolhouse. After giving them a severe reprimand, the *apu* flogged them publicly with a belt. Following the flogging, the boys tried to escape from the schoolhouse. One was caught just outside the building, but the other fled into the forest. There he ate the leaves of a poisonous species of *Psychotria* called *tsuím*, staggered back to the village, and died the next day.

For a time, Katán held the teacher and the headman responsible for the death, but his position had little support in the village and the matter was later dropped. In discussing these events, people contended that the boys were 'angry' and 'ashamed' because of their public beating and that this was the reason for their suicide attempts.

The young men who had fought with their father were not in a position to undertake cathartic collective action in response to their public punishment. They might have weathered the storm and endured the shame of the event, but their response was to translate anger and shame into an impulsive, self-destructive act that would punish their antagonists.⁴

Suicide as social action: the female perspective

Despite the frequently repeated assertion that Jivaroan society is egalitarian, enjoying 'a liberty without limits' (Allioni 1978: 105), the ability of women to participate in the discourse on death is much more limited than that of men. Although I never heard it said outright that women are incapable of killing, no case of a woman issuing death threats or committing a murder (other than infanticide) ever came to my attention.⁵ Sorcery accusations are directed to men much more frequently than to women. Nor is it common for a woman to be held accountable for a man's suicide; that is, women cannot 'kill' by tormenting others. The marginalisation of women from the use of force against others is consonant with the symbolic opposition of men as life-takers and hunters to women as life-givers and food producers.⁶

The subordinate position of women in political matters parallels their lack of leverage in domestic conflicts. Aguaruna women are less able than men to extricate themselves from unhappy marriages, and they often find their relatives reluctant to defend them from abusive husbands. Discreet extramarital philandering is permitted for married men, who are also able to form polygynous unions; women have no such liberty to engage in extramarital affairs. Without denying the complex issues raised by any summary assessment of male-female relations, it is fair to say that Aguaruna women are less able than men to realise personal goals. In other words, they have less power.

Women can and do speak the political language of death by inverting the usual relations of aggression—that is, by taking their own life or threatening to do so. The very kinsmen who may be unwilling to intervene on a woman's behalf when she is alive are galvanised into action when she kills herself. They subject

her husband's behaviour prior to the death to the closest scrutiny. When the husband can be held accountable—say, because he beat the woman without sufficient reason—her family will attempt to exact compensation in goods or cash.⁷ If the husband refuses to negotiate with his dead wife's kin, they may assume a warlike posture.

More important than the possibility that a woman's suicide will destroy her husband's relations with his affines or compromise his personal safety is the certainty that it will deprive him of her services, which are essential to the maintenance of a household in which he can offer hospitality to allies (Siverts in press). Likewise, an unmarried woman who kills herself after an altercation with her father or brothers denies them both her labour and the opportunity to create strategic alliances through her marriage.

Aguaruna women are well aware of the hardships they can inflict on men through suicide, and they often use threats of suicide as leverage in domestic confrontations. When, for example, a woman decides that she wants to marry a man who is not to her father's liking, she may threaten to kill herself if her wishes are not heeded. A man contemplating a polygynous marriage must assess the likelihood that his first wife will kill herself in return; the possibility of her suicide serves as a powerful deterrent. If he establishes a plural marriage, his senior wife uses the threat of suicide, either implicit or explicit, to ensure that he gives her equal attention.

Aguaruna women assert that women who actually commit suicide often do so with a punitive intent. This Samsonic element is rarely as clear as that reported for some parts of Melanesia, where women go to great lengths to identify their tormentors publicly before committing suicide (Counts 1980; Johnson 1981). Nor do the Aguaruna subscribe to the notion that the soul of a suicide victim can come back to torment those who made her suffer in life.⁸ Still, as Healey (1979: 90) points out, a punitive intent may be a significant element in suicide even if it is not foregrounded by the victims.

Affective dimensions of suicide

To examine the psychology of suicidal acts is to enter forbidding, if not forbidden, anthropological terrain. Durkheim (1951: 81) contended that explanations based on psychology (and psychopathology in particular) were incompatible with sociological explanations of suicide. Now, nearly a century after the publication of *Suicide*, most anthropologists would accept that there are, to quote Michelle Rosaldo (1984: 138), 'sociocultural bases for experiences once assigned to a subjective and unknowable preserve of psychic privacy'. In principle, then, local models of self and emotions can bring important insights to the understanding of self-destructive behaviour within a given culture (Jorgensen 1983). Yet the terms of reference for such models still remain elusive. The best studies of the inner life of pre-industrial peoples (e.g., Rosaldo 1983; Lutz 1982, to pick two recent examples) show that situations which provoke strong emotions vary widely, and that the words used to label these emotions may have quite different resonances from their English glosses. Well aware that

my own field research was not primarily directed to these issues—issues which are, in any case, immensely complicated—I shall merely try to identify some prominent landmarks of Aguaruna thinking on the emotions rather than chart the entire territory.

In his sprawling ethnographic study *Head-hunters of western Amazonas*, Rafael Karsten (1935: 269) describes the Jívaro as ‘by nature impulsive and choleric’. Elsewhere in his work he presents Jivaroan character in a more favourable light, taking great pains to show that Jívaro men are affectionate fathers and generous hosts. Still, the first remark captures an important aspect of Jivaroan emotional life that has received little attention from more recent ethnographers. If by ‘impulsive’ Karsten means the direct and uninhibited expression of strong emotions, then the Aguaruna certainly confirm his opinion, for they see force of emotional expression as an index of the developed self.

In the Alto Mayo it is not unusual to hear a woman keening in a distant garden during the morning or early afternoon. When people hear this weeping, they say that ‘so-and-so is crying because she strongly remembers/loves (*aneet*) her brother’ or some other dead kinsman. Forceful expressions of grief, even many months after a death, are approvingly cited as evidence of a woman’s strong feeling.

Analogous patterns obtain for men. A man who ‘thinks straight’, that is, who has successfully undertaken the vision quest, speaks in a loud, self-assured manner. The force of his expression demonstrates his personal worth. At drinking parties, such a man laughs the loudest and invents the most clever songs. At a funeral he weeps openly and vows revenge against the sorcerers who took his kinsman’s life.

The cultural emphasis on impulsive externalisation of strong emotions clearly figures in patterns of suicide; folk interpretations of suicides, with their emphasis on ‘anger’, ‘shame’, and ‘grief’, reflect the Aguaruna’s own recognition of this fact. Yet where men are concerned, there is also a countervailing ethic of emotional control which insists that strong emotions be given appropriate form and direction. A man enraged by an enemy’s behaviour doesn’t seek this adversary out and wreak his vengeance alone. Instead, he waits, schemes, organises allies until the right moment.

Some young men indicate by their behaviour that they cannot live up to these standards of male self-control, and these youths are considered prime candidates for suicide. Two themes are prominent in descriptions of young men with suicidal tendencies. Informants first direct attention to what psychologists call ‘inappropriate affect’, that is, emotional expression dissonant with cultural norms. This includes laughing for no apparent reason, becoming tearful, sullen or belligerent at drinking parties when people should be enjoying themselves, pursuing love affairs at the expense of more serious male activities, and showing extreme agitation unwarranted by circumstances. The second theme is the unwillingness of youths to submit to paternal authority. Young men must subordinate their own life to that of senior men (fathers, uncles, fathers-in-law) until they have attained the social status permitting them to show social initiative. To fail to do this is evidence of defective thinking, which in turn predisposes one to suicide.

The behavioural profile of men who are deemed likely to commit suicide was outlined for me by Uwek Peas:

My nephew may also kill himself soon. People say that he shouts '*jeu jeu jeu*' while walking by himself in the forest. He laughs loudly for no reason at all. His brother Agapito is just like this. My own brother did this too, and he ended up killing himself. Men like this are *pujuchmín*, ones who will not live. That's why I worry about my nephews. They show signs that they won't live long like we did. Youths like this are always upset when they have a problem. They're never tranquil.

It's easy to tell which youths will live a long time: when they drink beer they're calm, respectful. They listen to the advice of their elders. They'll live to be old men. It's not hard to spot them.

Aguaruna men assert that women lack the ability to control strong emotions. 'That's why women couldn't make good shamans', I was told. 'They would become angry at the least annoyance and then bewitch their children or their husbands'.⁹ Thus even the most respected women in the community are held by men to be lacking in self-control adequate to the responsibility of controlling the powerful forces at the command of the shaman. By extension, men hold no stereotype of a suicide-prone woman, because *all* women are considered capable of suicide.

Women themselves deny that they are generically unable to think as well as men. When talking of their own attempted suicides, or the suicides of others, women emphasise the strength of the emotions that provoked a self-destructive act. Suicide was attempted 'so that my father would see how angry I was' or 'because my husband was going to take a second wife'. Indeed, many women account for the high suicide rate in terms of the worsening behaviour of men, who are now 'bad' or 'thoughtless'. Men, they say, freely commit adultery and mistreat their wives with impunity. The suicidal impulse is thus seen as a desperate (though flawed) attempt to control men's overbearing behaviour. Consider the remarks of Kapari Wajajái, who in 1984 spoke to me about suicide:

Sometimes women kill themselves when their husbands become angry and yell at them. But if a woman does this, it's because she's not a true woman [*dekás nuwa*]. I fight with my husband, but I don't kill myself. I want to be a good woman so that God will take me to heaven. [Kapari, like most Aguaruna of the Alto Mayo, is nominally Christian.] I'm thin because my husband scolds me a lot, but I don't commit suicide.

Men kill themselves because they haven't taken the plants that produce visions. With a vision, a man doesn't die easily. Without a vision, a man isn't prepared for marriage. He hits his wife for nothing, and she leaves the house, takes poison and dies.

My father saw my soul in his vision. He saw that I was going to live happily with my husband. When my husband scolds me, I sometimes tell him that I will kill myself. But I see that it would be a stupid thing to do. I have to be a good woman.

Like the comments of many women speaking of suicide, Kapari's statement is informed by a subtle melancholy as well as by some troubling contradictions. She interprets female suicide largely in sociological rather than psychological terms; women, she asserts, kill themselves because they are improperly treated by men. Yet there are also undercurrents that echo the views of men. A 'true woman', a woman of traditional virtues, can survive the abuses of men to meet her destiny—a destiny that, in Kapari's case, was identified in the vision of her father. Perhaps the saddest irony of Kapari's account is that the Christian ethic to which she subscribes has been instrumental in the discouragement of the vision

quest which Kapari believes produced proper behaviour on the part of men.

A deeper understanding of the emotional dynamics of suicide among Aguaruna women awaits further research undertaken by female ethnographers. The information presented here does, however, suggest that for the Aguaruna there is a fundamental emotional asymmetry between the sexes. Both men and women are socialised to express their emotions strongly, but only men have regular access to an institution—the traditional vision quest—that curbs self-destructive sentiments and other kinds of misdirected violence. As young men abandon traditional religion, women see themselves as ever more vulnerable to abuse.

Summary: Aguaruna suicide etiology

The anthropological study of suicidal behaviour has resulted in a deeper understanding of the links between suicide and power relations within society. Research in Melanesia has shown that women may use suicide or the threat of suicide as a formidable weapon in their struggle against male domination (Healey 1979). In an African setting, Jackson (1973) argues that among the Kuranko female witchcraft confessions, which essentially amount to suicide, represent the expression of a woman's desire to liberate herself once and for all from male control. The Amazonian case I have just described lends support to the view (and here I paraphrase Jackson 1973: 400) that in some situations powerless people use suicide to become subjects in a world that relegates them to the status of objects.

In Figure 1, I outline the process of suicide in schematic form. Nearly all the suicides in the sample were thought by survivors to result from cases of serious social conflict or the death of a close relative. Closer analysis of suicide accounts, however, shows that the precipitating event may have been only the most conspicuous part of a longer process of deteriorating social ties. These inevitably produce social and moral isolation (Giddens 1977: 312), which in turn leads to a strong emotional response ('anger', 'shame', 'grief') and a desire on the part of the actor to redefine his relationship to social antagonists and allies. The options open to adult men and women diverge markedly at this point in the social process. Men respond to difficult situations by mobilising fellow kinsmen and seeking a redress of grievances. The most extreme redefinition of social relations in response to a dispute is homicide; less drastic measures include public punishment of malefactors and community fission. All these actions are collective in nature.

Although young men are socialised to follow the pattern of collective action, most find themselves unable to do so when required by circumstance. Their only options are to bear the burden of inaction or, if they cannot contain their emotions, to undertake a solitary response against antagonists (through fistfights and arguments) or solitary violence against the self ('killing yourself like a woman').

Women facing social difficulties encounter even greater problems than do young men. Their ability to organise a collective response depends largely on the support of their fathers and brothers. A woman who is abused by her

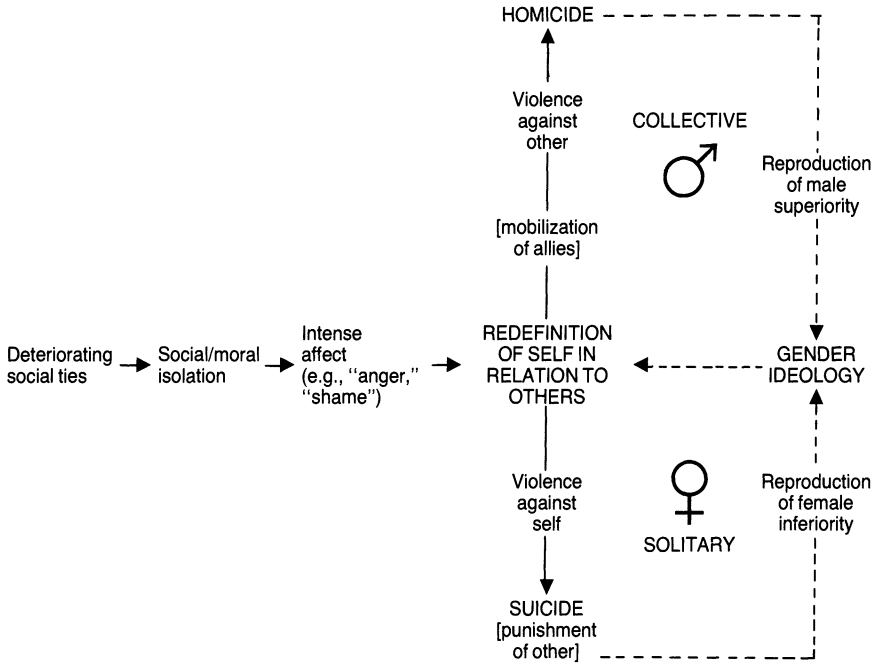


FIGURE 1. Schematic representation of links between gender ideology and suicidal/homicidal social process among Aguaruna.

husband often finds that her brothers are unwilling to intervene on her behalf out of a reluctance to alienate their brother-in-law. In this situation the woman's most effective strategy for punishing her social antagonist is through the solitary act of suicide. Both men and women thus manipulate aggression for strategic purposes, but women and adolescent men are essentially denied access to collective aggression that can be directed to others.

Recognition of the distinction between male collective action and female solitary action clarifies two unusual variants of suicide found in Jivaroan society: suicidal acts in war and multiple suicides. Harner (1972: 181) reports that the only kind of suicide known to Shuar men is intentional death in battle. When a man 'no longer wants to live', he repeatedly leads risky assassination raids. By taking the most chances and always being the first to confront the enemy, Harner says, the man ensures that he will eventually be killed. Here aggression against the self and aggression against the other are conflated in a single act, with an essentially solitary form of expression being undertaken within the idiom of male collective action. The Shuar data raise the possibility that the suicides now observed among Aguaruna men might have previously been disguised as battle deaths prior to the suppression of warfare by the Peruvian government.

The inverse of this phenomenon occurs in attempts by women to turn suicide into a collective act through the recruitment of collaborators. In the 1970's, a case of double suicide occurred in the Alto Mayo when a woman and her teenage daughter took poison together. Grover's (1973) field report and my informants

in the Alto Mayo note other cases in which women tried without success to persuade their co-wives, sisters or children to join them in suicide, presumably to transform private anger into a collective act.¹

The domestic tragedies of the Aguaruna reveal the ultimate defect of suicide as an instrument of power: it reproduces the very social and symbolic structures that make self-destruction a compelling option. When women translate their anger into suicidal acts, they demonstrate their social impotence, thereby confirming men's prejudices and contributing to the reproduction of the social meanings that make suicide attractive in the first place. Worse still, the current high frequency of suicide among Aguaruna women tends to vitiate the coercive power of suicide threats because men can no longer see a clear connexion between their own behaviour and the suicidal behaviour of women. 'It doesn't matter how you treat your wife', one bewildered man told me. 'Women now just kill themselves for no reason'.

The sheer complexity of Aguaruna suicide etiology should alert us to the dangers of assuming that suicidal acts within a society can be meaningfully organised into a small number of structurally similar 'types' without reference to the prevailing system of social meanings—ideas of emotional expression and self, notions of personal power and the political significance of death. Although these concepts are themselves only instruments in any attempt to explain suicide in an ultimate sense, they do shed additional light on the motives of those who violently renounce their claim to life.

NOTES

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¹ I have revised the Alto Mayo suicide rate downward from the figure of 218 per 100,000 inhabitants cited in Brown 1984b: 77. The latter figure is probably too high because of my underestimation of the valley's population increase after 1978. Any suicide rate calculations based on a population of only 1500 are bound to contain a high margin of error. Such a margin does not, however, alter the fact that Aguaruna suicides are very common indeed.

² In his ethnographic study of the neighbouring Shuar, Michael J. Harner (1972: 181–2) states that female suicide is 'relatively common', though he cites no specific figures. During a 1982 symposium at the 44th International Congress of Americanists, however, Harner and other anthropologists working with the Shuar and Achuar affirmed that the high Aguaruna suicide rate has no parallel among other Jivaroan groups.

For another ethnographic case in which two adjacent ethnic groups whose social and economic circumstances seem quite similar report very different rates of suicide, see Wolf (1975: 140).

³ See Grover 1973: 34 for the only case in the sample in which a firearms suicide raises suspicions of murder.

⁴ Detailed research on the precise meanings of Jivaroan words denoting internal states is yet to be undertaken. Without denying the need for further study of the subject by psychological anthropologists, my preliminary research suggests that the focal references of the Aguaruna emotion terms I translate here are close enough to their English glosses for the purposes of this article.

⁵ Harner (1972: 173–4) reports that Shuar women are skilled at poisoning male enemies, but I came across no similar accounts among the Alto Mayo Aguaruna. And Harner notes that when a woman poisons a man, the victim's family prefers to avenge the death by killing the woman's brother, suggesting that homicide is perceived as a social act between men, though one in which women may be accomplices.

⁶ As I have argued elsewhere (Brown 1986: 126–7), Aguaruna male-female symbolism is, in fact, contradictory in certain respects. These contradictions provide a symbolic tension exploited in ritual.

⁷ The available data suggest that the number of cases in which the suicide's family exacts a fine or administers punishment is actually quite small. The sample shows that compensation was actively sought in about twenty-five per cent. of cases, and obtained in roughly 10 per cent.

⁸ Contributing to an emotional climate in which suicide is plausible behaviour is an apparent difficulty in accepting the finality of death. After a suicide that occurred in 1978, the body of the deceased was left unburied for several days because the dead woman's husband had had a dream in which he was told that his wife would revive after three days. Even after her interment he worried about this, and on one occasion he partially exhumed the body to see whether it had moved.

This man's concerns are echoed in frequently told narratives about people who die and then recover, returning to life with tales of the afterworld (e.g. Brown 1984a: 234–5). Similar themes arise in Beasley's (1958: 5) description of a Huambisa funeral. Conscious or unconscious fantasies of rebirth may thus make the prospect of suicide somewhat less forbidding for the Aguaruna than it is in other cultural settings.

⁹ A woman served briefly as a publicly recognised healing shaman (*iwishin*) in the community of Shimpiyacu. She committed suicide after an argument with her husband, however.

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