

# Planes of forgetting: suicide among the Ticuna and the administration of narratives about suicide

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## Abstract

This article examines suicide among the Ticuna based on the dimensions of experience that is little or not directly mentioned in the immediate narratives about the deaths. It thus focuses on how these suicides are lived in the daily practices instilled by state institutions, and on how certain discourses are incorporated in the undertaking of critical daily events. Based on readings, interpretations and local sensibilities, enhanced in dynamics about health, disease and cure, and on the parental demands and expectations related to educational trajectories, the article presents an analysis about the functioning and development of government discourses and programs in indigenous villages.

**Keywords:** Indigenous populations; suicide; public policies; state.

# Os planos do esquecimento: o suicídio entre os ticunas e a gestão de suas narrativas

## Resumo

Este artigo examina o suicídio entre os ticunas a partir das dimensões da experiência pouco e/ou não diretamente mencionadas nas narrativas imediatas sobre as mortes. Focaliza, nesse sentido, em como são vividas no cotidiano práticas oriundas de instituições estatais, como são incorporados certos discursos no desenrolar de eventos críticos cotidianos. Pretende-se, a partir das leituras, interpretações e sensibilidades locais, potencializadas em dinâmicas sobre saúde, doença e cura, bem como nas exigências e expectativas parentais relacionadas a trajetórias educacionais, expor uma análise sobre o funcionamento e desenvolvimento de discursos e programas governamentais em aldeias indígenas.

**Palavras-chave:** Populações indígenas; suicídio; políticas públicas; Estado.



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## Introduction

In the Ticuna language *Tchau güü ta tcha rü ngüma* means “I forget myself”. Another phrase is used to say “I forget [a thing]”: *nü ya rü ngüma*. The expression “I forget myself” refers to the desire to “separate from this space”, to indicate that “I no longer want myself”, that “I will disappear”. It is a phrase commonly expressed by Ticunas who intend to kill themselves. It refers to a *forgetting* of oneself so that others also forget, to remove the body from oneself and others, to erase one’s body and its memory from a place which is thought to be refractory to one’s own existence. The relationship between forgetting and death relates to the urgent need to escape looks of reproof, disdain, judgement and or rivalry, to make them unnoticeable, thus becoming invisible. By obeying and or succumbing to orders of the spirits, which arise to say (or to confirm an impression) that one is dispensable, one forgets oneself to forget the forgetting of others.

The national Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health (Sesai) reported in 2014 a survey with detailed data about indigenous deaths registered in Brazil since 2007 in each one of the 34 Special Indigenous Sanitary Districts (DSEI), which encompass a population of nearly 900 thousand indigenous people. In those seven years, according to the survey, 2,365 indigenous people died from external causes (accidents or violence), of whom 833 were victims of homicide. Another 228 died of wounds, the motive for which was not determined. The survey does not include information about the authors of the crimes. Suicides, in turn, were the cause of 351 indigenous deaths from 2007 to 2014. The region of the Upper Solimões River, where the Ticunas are a considerable portion of the population, registered the most cases, 104, more than any other district. If it was a country, the Upper Solimões region would have the world’s second highest rate of suicides per inhabitant, 32.1 per 100 thousand inhabitants, behind only Greenland – where suicide among the Inuit is also high (Flora, 2009). The average rate among indigenous peoples in Brazil is 9 suicides per 100 thousand people, nearly twice the national average of 4.9.

These numbers, recognized to be under-reported, do not contemplate the magnitude of the problem. The continuity between external violence and violence committed against oneself is reflected in daily indigenous community life. One Ticuna once told me, while we spoke about some problems and generational differences concerning rules of community conviviality, that she thought that her community - where she and two generations before her had lived - as a “sad” place. I had still not consolidated any perception about this, so I could not offer it to my interlocutor, although I had been questioned as if to support her affirmation.

Sadness, shame (*ã´ne*) and anger (*nu´u*) are the expressions and states frequently used to speak about deaths by suicide. The forgetting of oneself, as I could interpret, became an escape from these emotions, and particularly from what motivates them. The escape specific to forgetting is not only elaborated by the Ticunas. It is also necessary to pay attention to the complicity that is built between an indigenous strategy of death as a political language of a frustrated struggle – therefore struggle and frustration, concomitantly – and of the more ambiguous mechanisms of the colonial relation, which blur the frontier of ethnic strengthening, of tutelage and governability, by producing other forgettings.

This article will defend the following points: 1) suicide among indigenous people is self-aggression, therefore violence; 2) the main issue related to self-aggression is not to determine the existence, inexistence or the level of “agency” contained in it, but to examine the political content that it emphasizes and gives potential to related to an ethnic struggle for survival; 3) I do not believe it is possible to see suicide as a form of lack of submission and liberation, or as a mimetic counter violence aimed at undoing subordination as proposed by Fanon (1979) and Hasenbalg (1979), concerning suicides among colonized and or enslaved peoples. It may also be this, although in conjunction with the opposite of this. Therefore, I propose that suicide should be interpreted as such (self-aggression), but I will do so by focusing on the paths by which the external violence is inverted once again against the self, and not against others, based on ethnographic data referring to the time that I lived among some Ticunas in a specific community, one of the 183 existing at the time on the Brazilian side of the triple national border that divided and insulated their territory. Thus, this article seeks to examine and operate in two registers that are apparently dislocated from each other: death by suicide in its concrete form, as well as the daily discourses and materialities involved in this problem, and the discursive developments around this, which not only dilute the problem, but re-elaborate it based on arbitrary framings.

I present here a specific discussion of an ethnography, which focuses on deaths by suicide by addressing them considering the social fabric, the dramas and the important daily affairs of Manayunk, a Ticuna community (Magalhães, 2014). My objective is to use this perspective to demonstrate the not at all trivial character of the existence and operability of activities related to *health and education* within the indigenous communities, which are two categories and activities that carry a morality and materiality established from above, but that are also interpreted and partially appropriated according to the indigenous realities and symbolisms. Thus, I intend to focus on two dimensions that have been little explored in the literature about indigenous suicides, which is incongruent given their influence on the dynamics and in the multiplication of dissonance and disparities among relatives.

### **The dilemma of “agency”**

The adoption of the word *suicide* to refer to self-aggressions among indigenous peoples has been constantly and warily problematized and or theorized by the literature dedicated to the issue. There is no doubt that suicide involves delicate dimensions that are difficult to approximate without risking a narrative domestication, in the counterproductive sense of the expression. The analyses are frequently concerned with 1) giving a distinctive character to the theme, in collective terms, considering the urgent need to demystify a diffuse discourse permeating various spaces and channels, which argues that suicide is a sign of indigenous social disintegration and disorganization; 2) qualify the character attributed to the self-aggressions, in terms of the *agency* implied by the act, considering that it frequently occurs under the effects of a spell, from the orders of spirits.

Analyses produced in the 1990s – some from the field of psychology – approximate these deaths to the Durkheimian concept of anomie, suggesting the occurrence of a social and cultural destructuring through which the indigenous populations are supposedly undergoing in which the self-aggressions that lead to death were high, such as the Guarani-Kaiowá, a collectivity about whom most of the first studies focused. Although with the intent to denounce the violent territorial expropriations that led to the “disorganization” mentioned, these analyses once again wound up delegitimizing and attributing a negative character to the indigenous collectivities with a high rate of suicide, by identifying a supposed intrinsic fragility among them. At the limit, the argument of this interpretation affirmed that in addition to provoking their own death, indigenous culture was disintegrating; thus attributing mutual causes and effects. More than this, the explanation of “disorganization” does not correspond to a more detailed ethnographic examination of these deaths, as I will develop.

In an effort to weaken this argument, some positions counter to the interpretation of “anomie” at times fall on an opposite extreme, by attributing this type of death to cultural aspects based on descriptions of indigenous cosmologies and categories, recognizing little influence from social, economic and territorial conditions on the indigenous populations. They thus do not give the proper attention to the territorialization processes (Oliveira, 1988; 2000; 2016) the indigenous have undergone and are undergoing.

The centrality given to the “agency” of the act is generally used as an analytical strategy to confront the idea of the “epidemic wave” inscribed in the notion of “anomie”, which would be like an earthquake that smashes the “cultural” vase according to the anthropological argument. Any death, disease or misfortune is due to spells, according to countless ethnographies among indigenous peoples. Therefore, the explicit or implicit argument follows that indigenous suicide should be understood and explained based on internal cultural elements.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider that, according to these analyses, based on ethnographic study dedicated to the theme, the indigenous explicitly differentiate death by suicide (usually by hanging or poisoning) from other types of death by shamanism, which are caused by the aggravation of their symptoms. At times indigenous people designate a specific word to suicide, as do the Ticuna (*ma´a*). In addition, it is necessary to consider, above all, the countless indications of alarm, raised by the indigenous themselves and not only by healthcare agencies, about the increase in this type of death, and the beginning of the recent occurrence of suicides in indigenous collectives in which there had been no news of self-aggression until that time, as indicated by various recently published articles (Araúz and Aparício, 2017).

Using a distinct perspective and foci that I will attempt to explain based on a specific case, I, like other authors seek to reinforce the argument that the suicides are due, not to a weakening but to the strength of the native cultural experiences, which are tenacious and unreconcilable with the expectations and possibilities created by advances in market relations, which strengthen the contradictions between economic activities and dissonant moralities.<sup>1</sup>

Indigenous suicide has become an issue that few want to debate, despite the statistical evidence and the fact that the problem is raised by the indigenous themselves, who question the intrinsic impossibility of discussing it by means of strictly “interactionist” or “structuralist” theoretical framings and frameworks. Under the tacit pretext of being a politically delicate theme, silence has become dominant. This contrasts with the frequency with which the theme arose in conversations between the indigenous and those who go to “study-them”. But the deaths, and this specific type of death, are increasingly imposed on the ethnographic data, despite avoidance of the issue, textually declared or not. The silence about the theme says more about the construction of theoretical disciplinary jails, than about the importance of this problem for the indigenous peoples. The fields of psychology and anthropology treat the emotional aspects of the issue quite differently. Psychology treats suicide as something real but does little more than fit a theory into realities that do not operate according to the presumptions of the respective framings adopted. Anthropology, meanwhile, treats the suffering on a discursive plane so it does not have to confront the difficult task of analyzing the types of conflicts that it involves in the case of autochthone populations. We thus have the paradoxical situation of anthropologists who leave home and write about suicides among indigenous peoples based on all the possible and imaginable dimensions about this problem, but not as an expression of a specific *real* suffering. Meanwhile, upon returning to their daily urban life, they seek therapies for dealing with their own difficulties with relationships due to correlated processes of violence. Avoiding explanations based on psychological motivations - a common recommendation in the social sciences - should not imply sublimating or euphemizing a quotidian social *problem*, or a failure to make a theoretical investment in it and produce data about it.

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<sup>1</sup> For a perspective similar to that adopted here see Mura (2006 and 2007) who writes about the Guarani-Kaiowá and Yagarí (2012) about the Embera.

I did not analytically divide suicides among indigenous and nonindigenous into two radically different types of phenomenon. The increased reporting of suicides among non-indigenous peoples globally accompanies economic crises, and suicides in both groups therefore present an evident connection with the advance of exploitation typical of domestic and foreign colonialism, daily violences and terror by the state, and its reverberations for face to face interactions.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the convergent mode by which Fanon (1979) and Freud (2010a; 2010b) formulate the question still echoes in the reflections about suicide. This includes the parallel that Freud establishes between a loss (of bonds), transitoriness and destruction and Fanon's understanding of the centrality of daily violence as destruction accompanied by the construction of an aura of loss in those who were colonized. Both these analyses focus on how violences and destructions establish a grammar of losses, and in contrast, on how the multiple types of losses are lived as destructions, which points to various routes for interpreting how these limit experiences of loss challenge the integrities of people.

By "losses" it is necessary to emphasize that Freud and Fanon do not appear to refer to "cultural disintegrations", a reading that possibly constitutes one of the reasons for which they are so little appropriated in contemporary analyses about indigenous suicides, which are based on shielding a specific notion of culture. To the contrary, the concern is for examining how the destructions in the surroundings – which are shaped as destructions of possibilities of a life socially valued in its idiosyncrasy – are experienced as destructions of a "self". A "self" that is evidently referenced in specific socio-cultural attributes and orientations and immersed in constant contradictions with the world around it. In this sense, if the ways that Freud and Fanon raise the problem are far from trivial or outdated, the ulterior reflection must necessarily be qualified to break with the pretentiously universal notions of person (in which the universal emanates from Europe) and that support the development of the argument, particularly the Freudian proposal, based on the importances, obligations and expectations valued in each socio-cultural context (Keesing, 1970).

Therefore, the analysis about suicide undertaken here begins with the understanding that the phenomenon must be addressed from three dimensions. First, by recognizing the concrete and violent character of the death, based on reflections on the continuity between territorial destructions and self-destruction in the materialist register raised by Freud and Fanon, or that is, self-aggression as a materialization of a specific suffering. Second, through the categories, importances and normativities of a sociocultural context that engenders the conformation of the hierarchically required obligations and expectations that are the object of constant negotiation among relatives, because they are in a permanent tension and creation of adaptive strategies to the social and economic conditions in which the Ticuna are inserted. Finally, through the narratives constructed about the deaths, both by the indigenous themselves and by healthcare institutions. In sum, suicide is seen as a face of colonial violence, as real suffering – even if it is not for us to narratively domesticate it – and as ideology.

It thus does not appear to be helpful to reinforce the dilemma around "agency" in relation to suicide (Broz and Münster, 2015). To the contrary, if the types of changes underway also present dramatic problems – the only consensus found in the texts about indigenous suicides – it is essential to examine why and how the revenge against the disturbances caused by the conditions and relations lived as refractory, fall mainly on the self. What is being destroyed or transformed in an act of self-destruction (Black, 1985:283)? What is the political content of the suicides and what do they say about the necropolitics of global capitalism (Broz and Münster, 2015)?

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<sup>2</sup> According to a report produced by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 800 thousand suicides occur annually in the world, a rate classified as an "epidemic of global proportions". Along with this unprecedented survey in the history of the institution, issued in 2014, WHO launched prevention programs and recommended the realization of detailed diagnoses, given that it involves an under-reported or not reported type of death in many countries. The document also informed that more than 75% of suicides take place in low- and middle-income countries. Sources: [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide); *Preventing suicide: a global imperative*. World Health Organization, 2014.

## The flow of daily life and the temporality of the immediate

It is not possible to speak of paradigmatic and atemporal circumstances in which suicides occur among the Ticuna. Hangings and ingesting of timbó take place according to findings and impressions about the demonstrations of disdain and distancing, which lead, as I previously indicated, to fears about the issuing of spells. The reasons for the disdain and the subjacent conflicts between people change as the sources of the problems change over history.

At the time in which I conducted ethnography about the theme (2011 and 2012) two issues predominated in the narratives about the disturbances that engendered suicides. One of them concerned men “betrayed” by the women with whom they cohabited. The gravity of the act and of the comments about it nearly exclusively reside on the male inability to satisfy the woman, which I sought to argue in another text (Magalhães, 2015). The “betrayal” also carried a message that the women had spells cast on them and no longer wanted the men to be close. Men at times came to see spirits and when they did not hang themselves, obeying the orders of the spirits, became sick until they died, generating speculations about the possibility of poisoning. The second situation related to the suicides reflected a period of transition of children to former children, particularly the expectations of parents in relation to this transition. Thus, to marry properly (Rosa, 2015), with respect for clannic exogamy, the network of affinities, and the preference for someone who had command of an activity that provided some form of sustenance - related to agriculture, schooling, or some other form of wage-earning - was a step that was highly regulated and accompanied by parents and other close relatives.

The casting of a spell by female “betrayal”, apparently limited to the dimension of simple extra-conjugal sexual desire and of an absence of conjugal desire, reflected misunderstandings generated by a division of domestic activities, at times leaving the wives unsatisfied in relation to the attitude of the men with whom they cohabit. This means that looking for other men was also a way of demonstrating dissatisfaction in relation to male performance of the daily and essential activities, showing him that there were more competent men, who were therefore more attractive.

Both situations of conflict that guided the stories about suicide - the generational and the conjugal - were therefore related to possibilities, impossibilities and difficulties associated to activities of sustenance at a time of rising conflicts among relatives concerning neighboring farming plots, complaints about invasions and burnings at borders of the marked territories, and of the gradual decrease in fish, due to predatory exploitation by companies on the Solimões River. Moreover, at the same time that schooling became a possible alternative and was stimulated by mothers and fathers in relation to their children, this trajectory presented many difficulties and obstacles, as highlighted by Paladino (2006).

To offer more density to this argument, while I attempt to avoid dramatizing the theme, I will present the history of a person with whom I became close, and who accompanied me during the entire time of my work in the Upper Solimões. Fortunately, there was no death in this case, but her declarations about the events in her life, which I accompanied at the time they unfurled, express in what way the contradictions, obligations and forms of management and violence that were imposed on that context trigger the sensations and complaints about feeling forgotten and confabulate the forgetting of the self, the forgetting of a memory linked to a body. They also reveal a sensation that I had regularly, which was that the embodiment of the space of death (Taussig, 1992; 1993) was far being something that afflicted the “ill” and “vulnerable”, it was a state given potential by the local atmosphere, whether as a response, extension, resistance or duplication of the multiple planes of violence encountered in the daily experience affected by the market economy to which the Ticuna communities found themselves entangled.

We´ena and I met at a time that coincided with the beginning of her flirtations with Ipacaráí, whom she came to marry months later. Until accepting to leave the house of her parents to live with her new husband, she underwent a long path involving resistance, differences with Ipacaráí, antagonisms with other women

who also wanted him as a husband and pressure from her parents for her to fulfill the tasks corresponding to adult life, beginning with marriage. This transition to adult life would considerably change her routine and the way that she would be treated since then.

Of six children, she was the youngest woman and the only one still living with her parents. In Manayunk, the first marriage usually takes place between sixteen and twenty years of age. The youngest brother, who was younger than We'ena, would marry at fifteen, while she still avoided marrying (cohabitating) with Ipacarái. For the standards of Manayunk, We'ena, 25 at the time, had passed the age to stay home with her parents, and still depended on them for nearly everything and, even the age for having children. Thus, she would gain the nickname *no'e* (avó), as people who passed the age to marry or have children were called. For a long time she referred to her relationship with Ipacarái, who passed the week with her in the same house, as a "modern relationship". If she would marry, she explained to me, she would be required to offer inconvenient explanations: about where she was, where she would go, when she would come back. She was still not used to the idea of so much control over her movements and the activities with which she liked to be involved: "I am now no longer participating in meetings because he keeps calling me all the time, wanting to know where I am", she complained after one disagreement with Ipacarái.

The "meetings" referred to her involvement with indigenous organizations, particularly those recently formed by indigenous women, among other discussions that took place in municipalities close to Manayunk. We'ena lived at a time in which many indigenous women of her age took technical and college level courses at university campuses available in the municipalities of the Upper Solimões. She sought to insert herself in spaces of formulation of public policies aimed at various indigenous populations who lived there. While her father paid for her computing course with his pension as an army corporal, her mother tried to convince her to be a nurse or nurse technician, occupations with high prestige due to the salary and frequent hirings by the Special Indigenous Health Secretariat (SESAI). In her movements through organizations, meetings and university debates about the indigenous issue, We'ena met many Brazilian and Colombian researchers. We met because of her interest in these activities and we began to become closer. It was also this universe - her daily life as a student, her travel to take courses or at meetings of the indigenous movement - that she did not want to leave, and thus avoided marriage. Between her irritations and giving up fulfilling her parents' desire for her to marry (by cohabiting with Ipacarái in another house and, preferably having children with him), she got used to saying that she did not want to marry, she "did not want to stop being her parents baby".

Some meanings of this statement should be highlighted. "Baby" has a definition similar to "child" for the Ticuna in Manayunk. Children who are still dependent on their parents in terms of food and housing were perceived to be dependent on them. Therefore, the diffuse category "youth" or "adolescent" has no correspondence in the relations between adults and children in that context, because puberty does not represent, strictly speaking, a period of transition. After puberty, children came to be seen as "adults" while they performed tasks and roles in keeping with this condition. "No longer being her parents' baby" referred to the movement of having to care for another house and of other babies. We'ena, like other people her age who were still single, understood the accumulation of activities involved in married life, also considering the conditions of support that were available and possible in that situation.

The efforts required by the idea of getting married go beyond leaving the house and curtailing parental dependency, involving other types of disturbances, such as disputes with other women who declared themselves to be her rivals. Two of them threatened to issue spells, personally or in written messages. The first was Ipacarái's former wife (the mother of his son), from whom he separated, according to We'ena, after "finding out" that she "cheated". This woman encountered We'ena on a very busy street, introduced herself as "your boyfriend's wife", "cursing" [in the sense of using offensive language] We'ena for being "very young", "just a girl", that is, too inexperienced to provide a satisfactory conjugal life for Ipacarái. The use of the verb "cursing" [in the sense

of using offensive language] and We´ena’s considerably upset expression soon after this unhappy encounter, indicate the dimension of the grave offense contained in those words. Later, this woman went to We´ena’s house a few times to threaten to have a curse put on her if she did not separate from Ipacarái.

The dispute involved other family members, including We´ena’s aunt and cousin who lived next door. Her “own” aunt (“own” was repeatedly used before a term of kinship in her narrative about conflicts, emphasizing the proximity of the threat or the offense), also threatened We´ena through her mother, who passed on the message: “My mother came home crying, she is very worried about this”. A few days later We´ena’s oldest brother “nearly died”, but was immediately helped by a shaman, who was called by her mother. We´ena also felt affected by these symptoms, as the face to face encounters between her and these other women took place. She began to feel pains, first in her back, accompanied by a “sensation that a little bug was crawling under her skin” – translated by other people as “formigamento”<sup>3</sup> – then, she felt “piercings” in her backbone, knee, that spread throughout her body.

We´ena defended herself by affirming that “she was not the one provoking this, but that he did not let her” participate in activities important to her. When the marriage was finally arranged between Ipacarái and the father-in-law [We´ena’s father], she still defended herself: “They want to put a curse on me, they can curse me”, she said, “they can kill me if they want. I don’t care. I already asked Ipacarái why he likes me...he was the one who insisted on being together”.

Even demonstrating a certain confidence about Ipacarái’s decision to “stay” [with her, in her house], some of her comments raised doubts about this relation, after some people told her that they had seen him some place “with another woman”. This information reinforced that there could be some correspondence between the threats of her rivals and Ipacarái’s behavior and doubts about having decided to marry We´ena. As long as there was no conversation between her father and Ipacarái, after which she could say she was “married”, there was the possibility of not going through with it.

We´ena delayed getting married as much as possible, which would concomitantly mean giving up daily parental support. At times she thought of plausible reasons to convince her parents that it might not be the most suitable person and time. “I liked him at first, until I realized” that this tie would bring many restrictions, like the impossibility of participating in “meetings”, because involvement with “organizations” and with other activities related to the “indigenous movement” appeared to be increasingly incompatible with her coming conjugal and domestic responsibilities, beginning with contributing to her support. The threats from other women, as she said, were not enough to definitively break up with him. She even invited me to be an accomplice in her new strategy; “perhaps (...) if I catch him with someone, I can break up with him without being guilty for this”. Amid the threats from rivals, fights and doubts, the break-ups and reconciliations repeated a few times during the time that We´ena had me participate in her preconjugal dilemma.

Before suggesting the possibility of marriage, her parents facilitated her life in every way they could. For example, if she broke or lost objects, her parents promised they would be replaced; if she did not meet deadlines or missed the classes paid for by her father, the tone of the reprimand was usually “mild”. We´ena usually said that she was treated as a child. After the conversation in which the marriage was agreed to between the father-in-law and the son-in-law, as well as joint collaboration to build another house, her parents came to be stricter in their demands. This would mean that she would have to take on the role and functions of wife, and they delegated to her more tasks beyond those that she fulfilled, so that “she would no longer be a little girl” – as she referred to the core issue of the difference between herself and her parents. But We´ena did not hide how reticent she was about this option.

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<sup>3</sup> “Formigamento” is the word commonly used in Portuguese to refer to an itching, burning or tingling sensation in the skin and is also used to say a limb “fell asleep”. Its root is in the word *formiga* that means ant.



Upon one of the many times that she complained about Ipacará's behavior and of the multiple disturbances that this union would bring her, her parents decided to terminate the issue and prohibit the continuity of the relationship. They ordered her to spend some time at the "farm house" far from the busy and main streets of Manayunk. Her father stopped giving her money – from his army pension – and limited her movements to school obligations, preferentially accompanied by a brother. Her parents thus drastically changed how they treated their daughter. What had been a patient wait by both mother and father for her to "stop being a little girl", turned to unexpected antagonism from them. She spoke of "guilt: for knowing that her acts and failures were directly related to her parents' deep frustration.

She said that she had never been treated so strictly by them. Of the sixteen months that I was close to her, it was during this period that I perceived that she was uniquely sad and did not know how to overcome the intense bad feeling between daughter, mother and father during the time that she remained distant from Ipacará. "I don't know how this happened, how my parents changed so much with me, I never imagined that it would be like this", she said crying. A few weeks later she continued to be in crisis: "It's all terrible. My parents haven't forgiven me. As I said, Ipacará ruined my life". The pressure, changes and conflict increased during this period. When she was already cohabiting with Ipacará and communication with her parents had been re-established, she told me at that time that she doubted she would be able to get past these changes and conflicts, and "began to think" that perhaps it would be better to no longer be seen by anyone.

Beyond the case of We'ena, transitions between the daily life of a child and an adult created constant episodes of crisis in that context. Crises are understood here as moments of contradictions between projections and expectations and the conditions raised by the reality to realize them. The idea of crisis, however, should not indicate a temporal sequence that oscillates between disruptions and a return to an ordinary life, to the previous normality. Crisis generate changes, whether in terms of strategies, relational configurations, shifts in projects or resignifications about the possibilities for the trajectories raised. The routes that were determined to be socially important - at a moment of transition that became a crisis - were being resignified over time and were attributed to other dimensions: the university, the school trajectory, participation in indigenous organizations, activities at her parents' farm plot, in the domestic chores and the care for the child.

Her parent's rejections, or impatience towards We'ena's indecision and timing, and the threats from other women, contextualized at a time of transition to a domestic autonomy and to conjugality, created a period of a delicate transition for her as it did for many others in her situation. She had commented on some symptoms; "little creatures" running through her body, as the first indications that she was cursed, and was soon supported and helped by her mother and sisters. The little creatures were caused by curses, shamans who cast spells on her, any person or people with whom We'ena had some hostile contact or disagreement, and for this reason she came to feel them physically.

It is thus not helpful to attempt to point to a single reason for suicide, or to opt for a casual vector, whether the colonial dimension or cosmological inscriptions. To the contrary, it is crucial to point to the inextricable articulation of the elements of a complex reality. More specifically, it is necessary to indicate the need for an analysis of the dimensions of the ethnic reality related to the possibilities for being in the world of these populations, to their possible territorialities and specific practices.

Many conflicts that precede and engender suicides and attempted suicides were contextualized in the demands that are contemporarily placed upon the Ticunas. These are demands and requirements from the social universe in which they are inserted, and that are valued and required at the micro level through generational hierarchical relations. The command over social codes in distinct universes is highly valued in that context, but so is fluency in the native tongue. The codes of the "whites" also dominate in terms of language (the ability to speak Portuguese or Spanish) and in the ways of moving through the urban universe, to allow the possibility of having a paying job. As the most populous indigenous group in Brazil and the Upper Solimões, the Ticunas

are politically hegemonic in various state institutions found there, like the National Indian Foundation (Funai) Sesai, and educational institutions. They participate in, administrate, compose and preside in these entities' boards of directors (such as in Condisi/Sesai).

In We'ena's case and of those of others about whom I have had information, the contexts in which the conflicts intensify are marked by the difficulty of conciliating school and work that contributes to reproducing the respective domestic units; and or involves changing to a new phase of life, thus renewing the airs of the houses, streets and other spaces, with the generation of children – whose existences and movements are uniquely valued – through conjugal cohabitation.

We'ena, like many of her cousins, relatives and acquaintances, absorbed the social pressure that establishes the need to confront and conciliate, in the most confident form possible, the life opportunities placed by that universe. To have a *big spirit* (ta'ötchi'i) – as long as it is not so exacerbated that one is seen to be proud and cause envy – implied a number of factors: having command of Portuguese without needing to abandon learning the native tongue; finding paid work that could contribute to domestic expenses (which they sought to guarantee by schooling); or learning abilities related to activities in the field and fishing.

The social and economic hierarchies forged and that were gradually advancing - whether through state institutions, public policies or market relations - come to be elaborated by relations between relatives, clans, houses and families. It is important to recognize that the family name, as well as that of the clan, also defines a mode of being in the Ticuna community where I conducted my study – while Ticuna cultural norms, reject the possibility for the existence of these hierarchies, which are prescribed by shamanism (yu'u), which is the predominant mode of regulation of conflicts among the Ticuna. Therefore, the opportunities for sustenance raised - mainly by valuing schooling - directly influence the construction of values incorporated to people, and establish differences between houses (brick versus wood, for example) among other types of differentiations in the living conditions between families and homes.

The value placed on schooling, whether exclusively embedded in principles of social mobility, referred to the scope of opportunities for being in the upcoming world that are negotiated between generations for the transition of children to adults. This mobility may be linked to access to rights – as in the case of We'ena, her schooling and engagement in indigenous mobilization. Yet it also tends to insulate the buildings that are already residences of the indigenous communities within more individual than collective projects, given that much of the effort at schooling is accompanied by suspicions and accusations related to arbitrary benefits and privileges gained from kinship networks. In this way, this mobility winds up leading more to economic inequality between those with salaries – like We'ena's father who had an army pension - and those without, and between different types of paid work, in the communities, than to advances in discussions about problems that affect daily community life and strategies to confront them.

The discussion in specific forums about curricular projects in the Brazilian educational institutions in the region, although they include indigenous representatives who have the right to speak at meetings and vote, is not accompanied by a deep discussion about the character of education, which could come to be emancipating and contribute to the construction of collective autonomy. The proposals frequently at the base of some programs, projects and even regular school and university courses, usually consist in the integration of the indigenous to the urban labor market. Therefore, the emphasis falls on social mobility, a problem that can compound the disparities and conflicts scattered through the community. As Luciano argues (2006:181), schools are “to a large degree installed by pressure from the Indians, without any reflection on their social role in the current and future life of the communities (...) in most cases they strictly follow the urban model of high school - disciplinary, vocational for the white world and focused exclusively on the knowledge of the whites”. In this way, Luciano continues, the educational process winds up representing to indigenous youth “a passage of life from the village (traditional indigenous) to non-indigenous life (city, job, money etc.)”

(Idem) - without a political reflection about the purposes of intercultural education. This process gives greater value to individual trajectories in the educational field – which also constitutes a possibility to guarantee self-reproduction in the realm of the nuclear family – than to advancing collective processes.

### **Disease, deaths and discourses**

Meanwhile, the incidence and cure of diseases - inevitably generated by the attack of spirits sent by curses - are articulated in daily community life to the medical practices of the government healthcare service installed in the indigenous communities, the clinics that are the base of the Indigenous Secretariat of Indigenous Health (SESAI). Despite the asymmetries and hierarchies constructed from above in daily community relations, there is not exactly an irreconcilable antagonism between a *medical* perspective and the healers and shamans. In terms of social practices, there is a conviviality between the healthcare system implemented at the clinics and various modalities of traditional cures.<sup>4</sup> When people get sick, especially in serious cases, they seek the health clinic, and there they determine what disease they have, although the origin of the diseases, or of what left them susceptible to illness, was inevitably seen to be curses issued by rivals. (The closer the emotional, consanguine and residential ties between the parties, the stronger the spells). The healers were allowed to attend in the health clinics, and there were dialogs and exchanges between teams of nurses and doctors and the local healers about a patient's state of health. Of course, the density and content of the exchanges between methods of distinct cure vary according to the staffs working in the communities. Thus, the speculation about and diagnosis of the symptoms and diseases emphasized not only the physical debilities of the people, but also debilities in current relations between people. At the healthcare clinic, while waiting to be attended, they spoke about *who and what caused the disease*, as well as *what disease it is*. In a certain sense, therefore, the medical discourse and treatment provided at the health clinic do not deny shamanism, but endorse it, while the shamanism complements the medical discourse. Patients under spells follow both the prescriptions of the doctors and nurses and of the healers and or shamans.

In terms of suicide – the Special Indigenous Healthcare Secretariat (Sesai) created a specific public policy that involved conducting a survey of the causes by having indigenous healthcare agents complete an “investigative form about a suicide/attempted suicide”, on which there is a place to specify if it involves one or the other. The questionnaire includes identification data about the person who attempted or committed suicide and questions followed by two blank lines: 1) Where was the body found and in under what circumstances?; 2) What was used to commit suicide?; 3) Did the individual use any type of drink or drug? What? The header on the forms suggests joint authorship between the federal Sesai and the local DSEI.

Even if they are not assiduously completed and used, the purpose of the form is to produce an epidemiological diagnosis, to be incorporated to an expanded database, with information about one of the highest causes of death among the Ticuna - even considering that suicides are underreported. The form also reflects the premises and gaps that guide the perceptions of public policies about the problem. According to the questions presented, suicide can be grasped as a death frozen in a single *act*, by surveying the descriptions of the situations or by the short temporal sequence of acts that precede the death. This narrative reduction, added to the exaltation of the suffering closed within itself (Das, 1995), tends to once again entangle those involved in *establishing responsibility* for the tragedy, at the same time that it projects an ideology about the institutional effectiveness and good will in the construction of strategies aimed at reducing suicide. There was an isolated attempt to use this data to deepen understanding about the issue, by expanding the discussion locally with professionals from Sesai,

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4 Langdon and Diehl (2007) formulate a similar proposal about the operation of the DSEI's in southern Brazil.

an effort coordinated by the local psychologist, in which I participated. In general, however, the form collaborated to creating the impression that *the problem was being confronted* and limited the indigenous suffering to dramas that in hypothesis were internally created and fed.

The mental health meetings, another modality of intervention in relation to suicide, were guided by similar concerns. They were convoked and led by nurses who were accompanied by healthcare agents (the only position in the healthcare field then occupied by indigenous people). It was a program formulated by Sesai in Brasília and coordinated by the psychologist from DSEI mentioned above. At the meeting at which I was present, the nurse, after discussing sexually transmitted diseases, sought to encourage a conversation about the deeper concerns of those present, who mentioned the vulnerability of the *youth* (a category used by the Ticuna when they intend to be understood by *whites*) to alcohol and drugs. Those present, mostly women, complained about the growing influence of the points of sale of drugs in the region and had an expectation that their interlocutor could have some influence on this problem. She then reflected on the strategies for mitigating two forms of self-destruction, the excessive consumption of drugs, in particular drinks with high alcoholic content, and suicides, interlinked with recommendations about what close relatives could do to treat or avoid them.

The causal association between suicides and exacerbated consumption of alcohol (more than any other drug) is not random or unreasonable. A superficial listening to the native narratives of suicides would take from the initial responses formulated to account for these deaths. If, on one hand, the purpose and effect of this more immediate association is to make exogenous a cause outside the body as person and as broader collectivity, the contrary would inevitably make the same body vulnerable to destructive addiction, and therefore equally diseased. Even if at times it is an expedient used to quickly respond to inconvenient questions, drunkenness - in addition to not corresponding to the state of all the people who hang themselves or take *timbó* - also does not hold up to comparisons of cause and effect among suicides and alcoholism, nor does it reflect the complexity of the cases as reported from a long term listening, as I sought to conduct through the experience of *We'ena*.

Both strategies for what is called “suicide treatment”, the examination form of a suicide and the “mental health” meetings, focus on individual trajectories, on the dramas and dilemmas confronted, and on sharing as cure - which Foucault (2009) denominated as confessional practices of intimate life. It involves individuals expurgating and making intelligible their disturbances through dialog, to help avoid that they arise in domestic situations. The term “mental health” reveals the concepts subjacent to these programs: the self-provoked deaths could be resolved based on an individual logic of treatment of people who relate to each other as “individuals”. By calling on families to discuss the cases, the objective is to help them manage, and to teach their family members to deal with the social dilemmas and incapacities.

The theories of shamanism and allopathic medicine are divergent about this issue. While the latter gives priority to symptoms and curing the individual, the first is concerned with defending the effects of envy, jealousy and the *bad words* that constitute the curses that cause the diseases and the visions of the spirits, some of which are those that order the “forgetting of the self”. But only this. The complementary action of these two systems makes secondary and residual the dimensions of territoriality, or the conditions that are established for the social reproduction of the Ticuna and their development in time. This occurs less by poor decisions and scarcity of expanded spaces for discussion of community problems than by social absorption in the daily reverberations of a specific territorialization, in the ordinary struggles of life.

## Final considerations

Even if we begin with the understanding that indigenous suicide stems from the precariousness of a vulnerable life created and imposed by market relations and the multiple forms of racism engendered by state expansionism - and consider suicide to be a form of genocide, an effect of the totalitarian practices and of the terror perpetrated against the indigenous - the question remains of why the revenge against the multiple injustices and expropriations falls on the self and not on the direct or hidden agents of the state and parastate capitalist tempest - like the armed groups that protect and propagate illegal commercial activities that are quite common around indigenous territories. This does not involve merely a heuristic intention of “sociological explanation”, as affirmed by contemporary lines of thinking about the theme that seek to overcome the Durkheimian anomie by sublimating his still central and pertinent questions. What is at stake is that the violence suffered is effectively inverted *once again against the self* - and, I repeat, not against others - by means of suicide.

What makes the phantasmagoria of *sadness* - or anger - remain in the first plane, not only as if it had sprouted without having been planted, as if it was the root and the leafy branches of indigenous suffering, clouding the context of socio-economic exclusion in which these collectives are inserted? Sadness comes to be shaped as an ideology and daily sentiment and experience, or as an ideology that goes beyond its own limits in affective languages. What are the mechanisms that collaborate or support this? I understand that the case-by-case debates and indications around these questions are essential if we want not only to understand why suffering as an internalization of the violence is one *among other possible* effects, but above all how the response to this suffering could be expelled to outside the domesticating borders of indigenous villages - territories that are more susceptible to colonial violence - or from other locations. In other words, it involves an analysis about the affects that engender it, precisely by constituting political languages that are irreducible, in this case, to the polarity between protest and resistance *versus* self-annihilation. Because, in this case, they are both, and the result is too unequivocal for us to continue the debate in terms of the “agency” of the act, or to treat it as an epiphenomenon of ethnic extermination. To seriously consider the statistical data - suicides in Brazil more frequently strike indigenous peoples - is to understand what these acts communicate and which other acts are forgotten. This can reveal the mechanisms by means of which colonial violence is duplicated and inverted, through the internalization and collective sharing of intense mutual responsabilization and shame.

I focused my argument on two spheres which are raised for the anthropological discussion - in both the academy and in non-governmental organizations - about indigenous suicide, generally through the perspective that something is “lacking”. *More* education and *more* healthcare can mitigate the problems (which are known to be structural). This discussion has frequently been guided by the argument that stronger and more present services of *healthcare and education* are necessary conditions primordial to assisting and decreasing the indigenous people’s difficulties and suffering. The issue goes beyond the problem of land that immediately and directly relates to decreasing possibilities for support - demarcation is far from being a final solution for the autochthone populations. I suggest that, depending on how the educational and healthcare systems interact with the indigenous reality, and how much their structures, guidelines and practices are dedicated to consistent action to benefit - instead of “providing assistance” to the indigenous populations - as well as the latter being willing to appropriate these services to support construction of a collective autonomy - the consequences of the action of these institutions for the local dynamic tend to produce more tutelage than autonomy, more inequality than just distribution, more ill will among relatives than collective political strength.

These effects, it is known, are not exclusive to the indigenous reality, given the orientations and limits of state institutions, however, they are more explicit in the face to face interactions specific to micro-sociabilities, and therefore are noticeably more harmful. This is even more so if the contradictions that these institutions introduce or directly or indirectly heighten, contrast with some indigenous cultural premises – such as the incessant search for equanimous conditions for reproduction among peoples, lineages, clans and homes.

Translated by: Jeff Hoff

Received: October 19, 2017

Approved: October 26, 2018

**Acknowledgements:** The study on which this article is based was financed by the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES)*, and conducted within the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the *Museu Nacional*, and was thus made possible by the human and structural resources for research and education at this institution. I would especially like to thank João Pacheco de Oliveira (MN-UFRJ), who supervised the study; Adriana Vianna (MN-UFRJ), Mariana Paladino (UFF), Fabio Mura (UFPB), Cynthia Costa, Lincia José Miguel, Nino Fernandes (in memoriam) and Athos Vasques.

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