# Indians in Brazil Wither in an Epidemic of Suicide

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

DOURADOS, Brazil — Haunted by memories of the elderly aunt, the nephew and the cousins who have killed themselves, Valério Vera Gonçalves dances hard over the earth and chants to the heavens. He wears a crown of pink feathers, and his entreaties mix with the roar of a nearby tractor on the edge of this boom town: "Go find a good road; chase away the evil spirits," he calls out.

For Mr. Gonçalves, who runs the Kaiowá Indians' house of worship here, prayer is the only defense against an epidemic of suicides that have plagued his people over the last few years.

"We have to dance very hard and pray," said Mr. Gonçalves, 48. "I feel as if I'm losing pieces of myself."

Over the last 10 years, some 200 Kaiowá are thought to have killed themselves in this southern region near the border with Paraguay, and anthropologists say they are now seeing suicides among other tribes. While the general rate of suicide among Brazilians is roughly 1 in 28,000, last year as many as 56 of the 28,000 Kaiowá in this region died in what are presumed to be suicides.

For the Kaiowá, a subgroup of the Guaraní Indians, the suicides seem to be tied to their estrangement from the land, on which their traditional life of fishing, farming and worship depended. A peaceful people who tend to withdraw from confrontation, the Kaiowá have, in the span of 75 years, suffered the kind of losses of land, people and culture that have characterized the Indian encounter with Europeans for 500 years.

When Europeans arrived here, Brazil was home to an estimated five million Indians. At the start of this century, their number had fallen to one million. Now, there are 230,000.

Since 1945, the Kaiowá have watched their land shrink from 25,000 square miles — roughly the size of West Virginia — to 172, and their language and their rituals disappear with the arrival of white colonists and the increase in the number of religious missionaries. In Bororó, which is near Dourados and the center of the surge in suicides, some 6,000 Kaiowá live on 10 acres.

The wave of suicides has prompted other tribes to gather here, offering prayers and shares of their crops. Government agencies have promised food and seeds, but so far, the Indians here say, Government help has not reached them.

Late last year, Justice Minister Nelson Jobim pledged to return nearly 4,000 acres to the Kaiowá. But signaling the explosiveness of the contest for land here, federal and military police protected Mr. Jobim as he announced the areas to be turned over. The 40 colonists whose land was earmarked have vowed not to leave; no land has been returned.

Although the Government Indian protection agency is conducting a census that aims to return the Kaiowá to some of their historic lands, that goal has become more unlikely under a decree that President Fernando Henrique Cardoso signed in January. The decree allows non-Indians to challenge pending and future allocations of land to Indians. Since it was issued, there have been six challenges to Kaiowá lands here.

The Kaiowá live on the margins of Dourados, an agribusiness center started in the 1940's with a land redistribution that gave each colonist family 75 acres to farm. Now, grain silos and neatly planted fields stretch for miles, while the Kaiowá go hungry, unable to eke out a living on less than an acre per person.

As a result, the Kaiowá men leave for work in distant sugar cane fields and distilleries. The women, left behind, clean houses, sell trinkets, beg and sometimes turn to prostitution. The most common suicide tales begin with husbands who became alcoholics while away returning home and fighting with their wives.

"Land is much more than simply a means of subsistence," wrote Alcida Ramos, in his book "Indigenous Societies." "It is the support for a social life that is directly linked to their system of belief and knowledge."

With missionary churches springing up to replace the Kaiowá's religion, and schools teaching Portuguese instead of their native Tupí-Guaraní, the suicides are a stark illustration of the Kaiowá's decline.

"It would disintegrate any people," said Orlando Silvestri Zimmer, who runs the local Indigenist Missionary Council, a Roman Catholic organization that works in behalf of Indian rights.

Mr. Zimmer complained that 28 religious groups, most of them evangelical Protestant, have flocked to the area in recent years to convert the Kaiowá. His own group, he said, does not try to convert Indians.

Anastásio Moura, a Kaiowá who struggles to grow rice and a few crops to feed his family on a half acre, said his people felt spiritually and physically drained. "There's nothing left to take away," he said.

In an effort to build up commercial farming, the Brazilian authorities also imported the more assimilated Terena Indians from the north, who have traditionally dominated the Kaiowá, and have taken over some of the most fertile land.

With a branch, Mrs. Moura traced a rectangle in the dirt to show the land where her parents once grew rice, manioc and potatoes. It was more than seven acres, she said. She then drew a smaller box in one corner denoting her mother's current property. After her father died, she said, the local leader and another Terena demanded three-quarters of the land.

"They said if she didn't give it over, they would beat her up and burn her house," Mrs. Moura said.

Many here complained that corruption and the power of the captains were responsible for the loss of lands and the failure of Government aid to reach them. The captains, Indians who were historically appointed by the military as go-betweens with white society, are now elected, but their authority has subverted the influence of religious leaders and the traditions they represent.

There are also signs that some suicides may mask murders. According to researchers at the State University of Mato Grosso do Sul, as many as six presumed suicides may have been murders, implicating local authorities in a drive to push Indians off the land. Authorities in Dourados deny the accusations.

The Kaiowá do not themselves ascribe the suicides to specific actions by the Brazilian Government, although they do link it to living near white people.

"They have bad thoughts," said Paulito Aquino, a religious chief who gave his age as 110, and who wore the traditional tambeta, a reedlike stick, through his chin.

"They are in their houses, but they're thinking, 'Those Indians, they might as well die,' " said Mr. Aquino.

John Maier Jr. for The New York Times

Kaiowá Indians in Brazil, whose land and traditions are being lost, have an alarming suicide rate. Brasil Jorge and his wife, Juliana Karape, are among the Kaiowá who turn to religious beliefs and rituals as a help.


The New York Times

Indian lands around Dourados have shrunken considerably.