

## **CULTURAL ANALYSIS: Suicide in a forest area in Sweden**

**Abstract** – In the ongoing discussion about whether individual factors or health conditions, most mentioned depression, are the cause of suicides, or – inspired by Durkheim – social factors are the ones to blame, I want to present a real case. It deals with a suicide wave in a Swedish society with a Finnish culture that remained stagnant for a long time because of long distances to the nearest settlements and a lingering reverence for the old culture, that continues to be a strong ideal for the men. An earlier study of these suicides in the 1980s was presented 1990/ref 7. However, the discovery of a sudden raise of male suicides during the period 1924-1934 and the fading out of the suicides after my study at the end of the last century makes it motivated to review the whole material.

The study is based on participant observation in two years when I was working as a general practitioner in the area, statistics, reviews of health care and social service records, police investigations, letters left behind by suicide, interviews with relatives, historical research and information from people living in the area.

If accepted that social and cultural factors can give rise to suicides, as I suggest here, there is still a discussion needed of how to find these factors, how they work in different societies and how to prevent the suicides.

In Durkheimian terminology, these suicides are judged to be fatalistic, as they depend on a strong manly ideal.

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In the first part (pp 2-4) of the study I explain my understanding of culture. - In part 2 (pp 5-15) the suicides of 23 men committing suicides 1959-1984 are analyzed according to a model by Raymond Firth, which perceives suicides as caused by a situation which in that culture constitute a crisis and the possibilities there are in the culture to find other solutions. - In part 3 (pp 16-18) I describe and analyze the beginning and the end of the suicide wave. - In part 4 (pp 19-24) the suicides are analyzed in relation to the culture.

## CULTURAL ANALYSIS - SUICIDES IN A FOREST AREA IN SWEDEN

*Each social group really has a collective inclination for the act, quite its own and the source of all individual inclination, rather than their result. ... These tendencies of the whole social body, by affecting individuals, cause them to commit suicides."*

(Durkheim, 1897, eng.version p 299).



**Image text:** *Older family home in the village. This was the typical dwelling for many families.*

### Part 1: WHAT IS A CULTURE?

Culture is about what we do and how we do it, what we say and don't say, how we behave towards each other, how we perceive and interpret events and how we act, how we think, what we believe in and what means something to us.

A culture is a coherent whole. All parts are connected to each other. Nothing takes place in a vacuum separate and outside of culture. Some parts are more firmly or loosely tied to the underlying value structure. Different parts influence each other and transfer meanings to each other.

Two central concepts in a cultural analysis are “value” and “meaning”. In every culture there is a value scale that runs through the entire culture. Some things and events are considered more valuable, others less so and others are completely condemned.

Events are conceived and interpreted in relation to the content of the culture, they get their “meaning” in and from the culture. Often the values or understandings do not need to be articulated because everyone in the culture is familiar with them. Because the culture we grew up in or live in is so obvious, we also do not question why we do them. In the end we forget the reason.

It is difficult, or it is at least difficult, to analyze our own culture. This is because actions in our own culture – the structure of “meaning” in our own culture - becomes so self-evident that we can hardly believe that they can be done in another way. Sometimes they remain long after the condition that motivated them have disappeared. In rural areas where history goes back over several generations, the tradition gets a special emotional value and any attempt to do otherwise is viewed with skepticism and sometimes aversion. In the forest villages in Hälsingland, things should not be done better or worse, they should be done right. A fence yard must be built in the right way with the right kind of poles and slats to fasten them together so that the finished fence looks in the right way. The fact that a man in Hälsingland (himself) has built such a fence around his house or sheep pasture is taken as a guarantee that he is also otherwise meticulous and knowledgeable and that you can trust him in all situations. If the fence is carelessly built, it brands the man in the public mind as a slouch and a cheater, an assessment that usually is difficult to wash away.

A culture is not static, it changes. There is a certain inertia in culture, especially if it is cut off from the outside world. Parts can change at different rates. The central value structure is particularly persistent. Change goes faster if new impulses penetrate. New impulses from outside can change the culture but also create contradictions within the culture. Several different cultures may arise that are in conflict with each other and may be covered by groups.

A difficult thing when trying to understand a culture is that it is implicit, hidden and often indistinct even to those who belong to it. We all behave most of the time according to our culture but we are not aware of it. Those who have lived for a long time in the same culture understand deeply what an action means. In sparsely populated areas where people live together for a long time and are not used to speak much, it is not uncommon for messages to be expressed symbolically – a neighbor who put on his best suit when he goes to pay a visit of condolence to a woman whose husband has just died does so to honor the man. In Los, the suicide messages that were left by the men before the suicides often consisted of symbolic acts that could easily be misunderstood or not even noted.

How can you investigate a culture? One method I have used here is participant observation. It means collecting day by day observations of events and impressions in the culture, about what happens around you, what people say and do, how an event is commented. This method is based on the fact that a culture is coherent. Each observation can provide a piece of the culture. Even a simple statement can contain a central task for understanding part of the culture. Observations can be made of all kinds. Every part of the culture, events, utterances, stories, behaviors are in accordance with the culture. When we have collected enough pieces, a pattern gradually begins to emerge.

But there is a pitfall. We tend to perceive things according to what they would mean in our culture. What we do then is to translate into our culture. The problem is that we are fooling ourselves. One thing that has a specific meaning in our culture may have a different meaning in another culture. The method to avoid this is to work “unconditionally”, i.e. avoid interpreting before a large number of observations have been taken in and can be compared with each other.

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Let’s take a trip down to Los in the 1980s. It means leaving behind us all the ideas and perceptions that we have and take for granted but which are actually part of our culture. People in Los are helping us. They say: “We are different. We live in the forest.”

## PART 2: SUICIDES IN MEN 1959-1984

### THE CULTURE / THE MALE IDEAL

The Finns who came to Los in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries came from another forest area in Savolaks in Finland and brought their culture with them. They settled in a previously unbroken forest miles wide far from Swedish settlements and had to manufacture everything they needed from the forest. They came one by one or two together and settled far from each other. When another Finn got too close, strifes broke out. There were no roads, but in the winter you could make your way over the frozen lakes.

The forests were full of wild animals, such as lynx, wolves and bears, and weapons were a necessary equipment to carry with when the men went out into the forest. Already early, the Finns fabricated guns from bog-ore which was melted to iron together with glowing charcoal from coal miles in blister ovens, that are to find around the forest. The guns became famous and the method spread to other regions. They also provided an opportunity to shoot an animal passing by to take home as food, a possibility that guaranteed survival in times of famine, which were usual at the time.

Hunting was a challenging and exciting adventure which was undertaken exclusively by men. Endurance and ability to adapt to the behavior of the animals that sometimes could be risky, and to act quickly and effectively in the right moment led to respect and fame. To kill a bear was a great deed. The bear skulls were placed at the top of tall trees to promote hunting luck. – A young man who shot a bear in the 1980s was praised as a hero and it gave his prestation a nearly magic meaning that his grandfather previously had been the last person to shoot a bear in the area.

The only contact with the surrounding world was the district-court sessions, the tax collector and the church's catechetical interrogations intruding into the villages, where they were met by suspicion, caution and averseness. – There was still in the 1980s a skepticism towards people who came from outside. This included the healthcare. During my years in the village, there were men – and some women – who lived alone in the forest and to whom not anyone was allowed to come. Among those who were allowed to come was the district nurse who was from a nearby village, but not me. A man who was schizophrenic and saw spaceships between the trees lived alone in a forest hut where he felt safer than in the village. In the end, the talented women at the retirement home

managed to coax him into the home where he sat and said he had never been doing so well before.

The Finns were the model for the men even in the 1980s. It was said about the Finns that for them nothing was impossible. Men who had a sure descent from the Finns, for example because the grandmother still could speak a little Finnish, were considered to have a special ability and knowledge and thought so themselves.

Forest life and its challenges made men strong and independent. It was important to cope with even demanding and heavy work and hardships without complaining or having to ask for help. In the forest there were old memorials and blast furnaces. There you could *"be as you wish"*. It was here men retreated from worries or discord in the family to hunt and fish. Men who had moved from the village and had difficulties adapting to other places returned to the forest where they felt safer. A man who had contact difficulties in another society, could when he came back to the forest, socialize with others. Another man who had been involved in several fights in the village retreated to the forest, *"it is calmest that way"*. In the autumn, the men who had moved from the village returned to the elk hunt, which characterized the whole area during these days. Young men were reluctant to move away: *"You need to have possibilities to hunt and fish"*. A little boy's dream was to grow up and be out alone in the forest hunting moose.

The villages in the forest were depopulated settlements with constant threats of withdrawal of resources, several miles of dense forest from other villages. Due to its location in a border area with openings to two landscapes, Hälsingland and Dalarna, there was no clear connection in either direction and people kept themselves in the villages.

In the village there were few meeting points, the petrol station and the store. The village streets were empty because there was a long distance between the houses and people went to each other by car. When bingo was organized in Los once a week, people started queuing in cars hours in advance. On the west side there were occasional eateries for passers-by on the road.



**Image text:** *This is an example of a remote house in the Los forest.*

THE WOMEN participated in the life of the village, took care of the home and children. There were an old people's home, a shop, church, a health care center with a constant shortage of doctors. The women were social, engaged in village life and cooperated with each other.

The social structure showed a difference between male and female spheres. The men worked in the forest, hunted and were often out in the woods. The women had jobs in the village, took care of the house and family. At the end of the summer they were out in the forest picking berries to contribute to the family's economy.

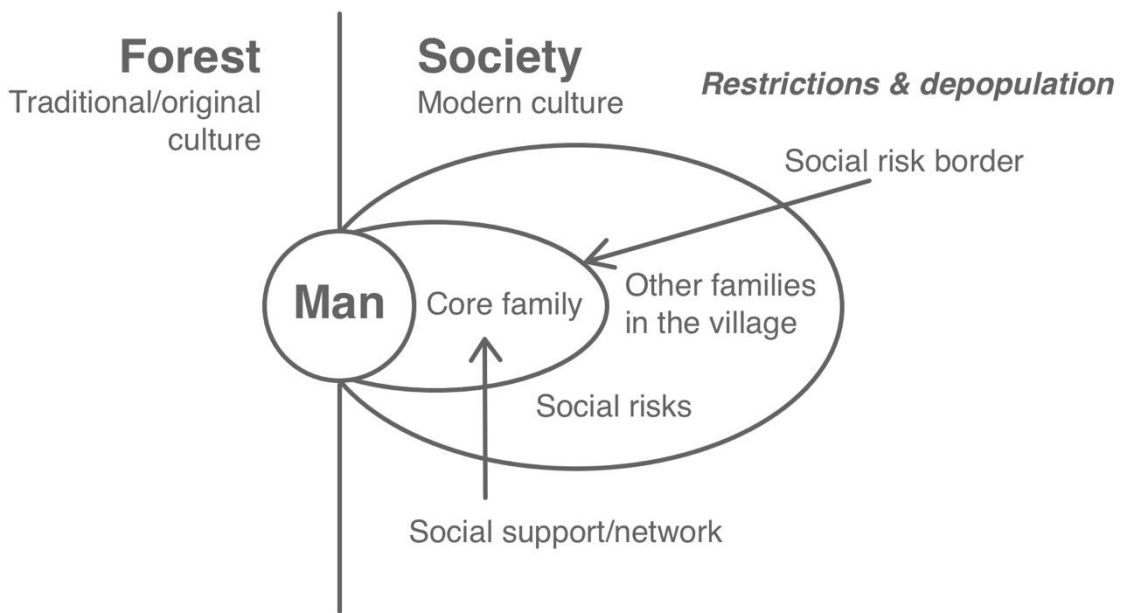
The male ideal came to be preserved especially in the hunting which spurred achievements and rewarded the man for his skill, strength, ability and patience to endure and solve even difficult tasks himself without needing help. The man's success in elk hunting had significance for the entire hunting team. This was based on a strong sense of belonging among the men, but also demanded from each man his own ability and responsibility for the success of the entire team.

Somehow, the elk hunt was also a show. It was a competition. Or maybe a check up of one's own ability. Even if the moral of the team and its leader's intent was to promote equality in the team, joint participation in the team's successes and an equal distribution of the meat, every man in the team knew who shot damage to a moose. A damage shooting occupied the entire hunting team through the responsibility to find and shoot the injured moose. Because the whole village was involved in the hunt – the women by taking care of the meat – everyone in the village also knew, even if unspoken, who shot the moose or mooses and also who had shot a moose to damage. In case that man had also failed to start an animal farm or at times drank more alcohol than was considered appropriate in the area – which had a relatively high tolerance – the failure in the hunt was yet another thing that could be added to his track record in the village.

Being a good hunter was a title of honor that won respect in the whole village. In a previous report (1990, ref 5), I am telling about a man who was known to be a good hunter. When he was affected by several serious illnesses with age, he struggled for several years to participate in the elk hunt. He was also successful and shot every year one or a few mooses. When that no longer worked, he shot himself on the place there he had killed his first moose, one so called "17-taggare" - that means a moose with 17 thorns in the crown. The act to kill a moose is upgraded after the number of the moose's thorns, and this is a high point.

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**Image text:** Figure 11 from the book. The social world summarized in one image.

*The men of Los spend a large part of their free time in the forest to hunt and fish. The forest gives him natural experiences, a sense of freedom and connection to the earth. This is part of his manhood especially through hunting, which strengthens his sense of identity. The forest is perceived positively by him.*

*In society, the men are also part of a family, which constitutes their primary social network, which can provide support and warmth, but also make demands, which can encroach on or threaten his sector of freedom. Outwardly, he represents the family, and his actions have a bearing on the family's reputation. The contacts with members of other families constitute a social risk. They pose a risk of jealousy, social control and gossip. The external society is weak and is often experienced negatively by the men.*

*Traditional culture and its values live on particularly strongly in men's relationship with nature. The break between the old society and the new, which defines Los as a peripheral depopulated settlement, will therefore in many ways be focused and more challenging for the men."*

Westerlund-Hännestrand (1990/ref 7, p 66)

## THE SUICIDES

The crisis came when the man could no longer retain the male role. There could be a disease, old age, personal inability or failure with something he had tried to accomplish. Starting a company was a risky taking and the shame was great if you failed. There was a demand for equality in the village, no one was allowed to pretend to be better than another. People would rather *"tie their fists in their pockets"* than give voice to a dissenting opinion. When a man, who started a workshop in the village and employed several men, went bankrupt, the men he had employed went to the newspaper and complained about his bad machine park instead of starting actions to try to keep the few jobs there existed in the village. The skepticism towards new initiatives was palpable: *"Nothing can succeed in this village"*, *"There's probably no one here who can"*. To fail showed weakness and inability and exposed the man to degradation and mockery.

The exact reasons are not specified for the feelings of inadequacy and guilt that are expressed in many letters left behind by suicide. According to police interviews with relatives to the men very few of the men had informed their relatives about their trouble and bad feelings. Usually, the relatives had not even noticed the man's bad mood.

Several of the men's statements in letters left behind by suicide indicate that the men felt they could no longer reach up the demands they put on themselves, *"I have never been good to anything"*, *"I am of no use"*, *"I can't cope"*, *"I can't stand it"*. Many men expressed feelings of shame for not having been able to solve the situation themselves and writes that they do not want to ask the family for help and burden them, that they wish to keep the family away from suffering.

A couple of men threatened to shoot themselves when they, after a period of drinking, failed to get back to work. Two men had failed in the elk hunt, one due to old age and bad health, the other by shooting two mooses to damage. A man with a more qualified and status-giving job stated in a resignation letter that he *"can't take it anymore"*.

A couple of men mention worries in letters left behind by suicide for something they had done to a friend which they believed would harm him and expresses guilt and shame about that. There were strong norms in the village how to behave towards one another. Between some families bullying could last for generations.

Sometimes rumors arose in the village about the reason for a man's suicide. About an old man who had been much respected in the village for being a good hunter, gossip spread that he had failed at the shooting test before the elk hunt four times and therefore he shot himself. In this case it was important for the hunt leader to point out that this had not been the case.

The men's opportunities to get help in this situation were limited. Because of the demands placed on the man to cope with his problems himself, it was a sign of weakness to ask for help at all.

For a man who had a good reputation in the village it could be more important to preserve his good reputation and commit suicide, for which he would be respected, than to appear untrustworthy or as he pretended to be better than he was, especially if he had done something that was against the norms in the village. Suicides could, in case of bad actions, act as a redress. A man, who in a talk with me mentioned a man he said had been a real rogue and badass in the village, added as a mitigating circumstance that at least he shot himself.

Turning to the family with his problem was opposed to the requirement not to burden the family which brought shame. In letter after letter that the men left behind upon death there are statements such as: *"should I not be a burden to you"*, *"should you not ever have to suffer like this again"*, *"can't worry mother"*, *"think I should handle it myself"*, *"I guess they will feel better when I am gone"*. If the man yet did turn to the family, their reactions were uncertain and often negative or could alternate between support and rejection. If the family had previously tried to help the man, but had not succeeded, they often reacted negatively and dismissively.

The man then withdrew, took care of his duties, avoided complaining and tried to solve the problem himself. A man, who when still in life, took up his problems with his brother, was told that he should solve his problems himself, as the brother had had to do.

Message after message shows how the men fought to maintain their role in the face of shifting family support. In two cases there was alcohol abuse which was not known before the suicide, where the men had taken their lives rather than turn to the family. The standards and demands that the family placed on the man could be stretched, the deciding factor was the family's tolerance and willingness to help him. But the limits were in most cases set by the men themselves in order not to worry or burden. Reprimands from the family triggered the suicide in four cases. In the last days before the suicides, two men with alcohol problems sought support from several family members in vain.

It is nevertheless remarkable how rarely before the suicide the men – described in police reports by relatives as *“happy and brave”*, *“happy and open”*, *“popular and well-integrated”* – did turn to the family. This seems to have been especially difficult for the men who were most respected and liked. Of 11 men who by relatives in the police investigations after their deaths are described as liked and well-integrated, only three or maybe four raised their problems in the family. A very sensitive man who was really loved by his family, took his own life without ever taking up his problem in the family. After his death they found out that the reason was something he had done to a friend that they believed that he must have felt shame about.

In several cases, the mother appears to have been the one who very actively and lovingly intervened to help her son. In one case, the mother had made great and successful efforts to help the son out of an alcohol addiction, which was talked about and praised in the village. When the man later relapsed into addiction, which became known only after his death, he chose to take his own life not to bother the mother any more. In many of the cases, the mother was also the one who, when she suspected that her son had suicidal thoughts, hid the son’s rifles.

## CONTACTS WITH HEALTH CARE

Turning to health care was also fraught with risk. It required from a man to leave problems, which he should have managed himself, to a doctor who often was poorly known, whose judgments were uncertain, difficult to understand and over which one had no control. In addition, health care had access to methods that were painful and that one could be exposed to. *“You don’t want to end up in such a hellish machine”*. Ideally, men stayed away from health care, *“If I get sick, you shall leave me alone”*.

An illness was experienced as a serious threat to the man’s independence and ability and was often feared to lead to death. This concern was particularly expressed in the meaning of *“having cancer”*, which in their eyes meant an unescapable death sentence. Illness stood in contrast to the former forest life, *“in the past I was always strong, illness was somewhat rare”*.

Submitting to a treatment required the man being able to come to terms with replacing forest life with a completely different role which was experienced as degrading and insulting, *“to sit sick and incapable in a wheelchair at the retirement home”*. In that case, he meant death being preferable, *“when only illness is given, death is better than life”*. Or, associated with the hunt, *“you don’t want to lay and die by yourself”*. One woman, whose husband had died suddenly, expressed satisfaction that he died so quickly and painlessly, *“at least he doesn’t have to lay and suffer, he had never been sick before”*.

The lack of understanding between the men and the health care system was obvious, it was like they were speaking two different languages. Many statements of the men showed a terrified fear of health care and its methods while the men fought for their right to decide on the measures and regain control, "*can't you decide for yourself?*" One man took his own life the same day he had visited a doctor, another a few days after he was rejected from the health care. One man who came home after being treated for an injury in a hospital, but was called back, started drinking alcohol and looking for cartridges for his rifle.

The doctors were unaware of this problem. For the men, the health care system's way of thinking and methods did not match their own perceptions, especially if the doctor was unknown and "*from outside*". Doctors who were unfamiliar with the culture of the village were also uncomprehending to the men's silence, evasive behavior and half suffocated hints.

Previous health care records were brief and in most cases referred to temporary visits for physical complaints. There was no continuity in the records because the men had visited several health care centers. Of the 23 men who committed suicide between 1959 and 1984, five had never seen a doctor – judged by reviewed records from all nearby health care clinics and hospitals – and the remaining 17 men had visited six different health care centers in three landscapes, located within three different county councils. The men moved around freely by car for socializing and shopping and may have chosen the health care unit that was closest to them. There was no summary of the records.

Five of the men had been admitted to mental hospitals 1-3 years before the suicide, two of them after suicide attempts. Two had recently gone through a divorce, another man had divorced a couple of years earlier. The diagnoses in these cases were "Depression" in two cases, "Alcoholismus episode", "Insania praesenilis" and "Casus mentales NUD (without further specification)". The diagnoses suggest a lack of knowledge about the men's problems.

Of 14 men who visited a doctor in the last year before the suicide, the doctor assessed 5 to have psychological problems. For five of the others he expresses satisfaction with their health states in the records; "*feels himself full healthy now*", tells a police about one man that there is "*no signs of nervousness*", about another man he says that "*he feels totally calm when he leaves*" and in another case that there is "*no cause to concern*".

In sharp contrast to the doctors' calm comments in the medical records, eight of the 14 men expressed dissatisfaction and doubts on the doctor's judgements when they came home to their relatives. They feared they had a disease that had been missed by the doctor. Several men stated on

their return home that they “*had cancer*”, despite the doctor’s reassuring messages. One man said he had been made worse by the doctor’s treatment. Half of the men did not follow the doctor’s prescriptions, did not take the medicine the doctor had prescribed, did not come to an X-ray examination, reported themselves sick, stayed absent from a return visit. Four other men, who tells in letters left behind by suicide that they cannot stand a disease, had not even seen a doctor.

Above all, doctors were unaware of the high rate of suicide. The doctors who issued death certificates for the 23 men who committed suicide 1959-1984 came from seven different health care units. In one case, the death was confirmed by a nurse, in four cases only by the police. The only instance that can be expected to have known about the high number of suicides – apart from people in the village – was the police station in Orsa, who in all cases carried out extensive investigations. But this knowledge never reached the health care.

But the health center had for several years before my time a retired doctor who owned a holiday house in the village, who had established good contact with one of the men who later committed suicide, and had got him to quit his addiction to alcohol. The man had trouble sleeping and the doctor had on one occasion given him an injection of a medicine that had got him sleep and he searched thereafter the health care center several times to get the same injection. The man had previously had ambitions, he had started a business that failed and had been politically active. After a while, the man told the doctor that he had got a job in the forest, and after that he did not visit the health center for the whole summer. At the fall, he thought of participating in the elk hunt, something that could have increased his reputation and given him a place in the hunting team.

But the night before the hunt, he could not sleep. He called the emergency center in another location and asked for the injection he used to get. He got to talk to a hired doctor from a bigger city who was unaware of his problem. The doctor refused to give him the injection and writes in the medical record that he did not consider it was a part of the health care’s obligations to give an injection to an addict at night and advised the man not to participate in the hunt. The man slept badly and when he took part in the elk hunt the next day, he shot damage to two mooses, which caused dissatisfaction in the hunting team. In the evening, he sought contact with several relatives but received no support. He started drinking alcohol, called a relative, put the phone aside and shot himself.

In men’s discourse the suicides were talked about with a sort of silent respect, especially for the man who had shot himself. The courage was sometimes emphasized. In some sorts of situations suicide seemed to be the proper and the expected way to act. But there were also men who sought care at the health center because they were in a situation where

they said they actually should shoot themselves, but did not dare and therefor sought our help to find another way out.

THE WOMEN lived in a different culture with different values and understandings than the men. It is possible that the cultural difference between men and women had become greater over time as the women, who lived and worked in the village, were closer to the new incoming culture than the men, who retreated to the forest where the original culture was still alive.

The women's suicide pattern differed also from the men's. It did not deviate from the national average for female suicides, either in terms of number or reasons for the suicides, which were mostly social and connected to near relations.

The women described the suicides as "*something that flies into their heads*". "*If one does something, another does*". But to them the threats were real and they reacted resolutely when the man's mood seemed different from his usual and hid the rifles, which was the principal preventive measure in the area.

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## Part 3. THE SUICIDE WAVE

### THE BEGINNING OF THE WAVE

In the period 1924-1934, the number of suicides in the area tripled and for men quadrupled. Half of the men's suicides were done by shooting. Shooting is not earlier mentioned as a suicide method in the death and burial books which, together with an earlier study by Severin/ref 6, go back to 1860. Severin, who reported 9 suicides in the area in 1860-1890, corresponding to a suicide incidence of 19 suicides/100.000 men, did not mention the methods. In a neighboring forest village hanging and ingestion of fly poison are mentioned as suicide methods, but not shooting. One can, at least, conclude that suicides by shooting were not common in the area in that time, if they were at all.

The violent method gave an impression in the area and the suicides became known by people around, but a silence was built up around them and a taboo especially against people outside. – Also in the 1980s the suicides were demonstrative, like a man who blow himself to death with dynamite and one who shot himself in a phone call. Two men who were living nearby the area and had heard spoken about one or a few suicides, one of them by a description from a policeman, called them "harakiri", which might illustrate how the suicides were perceived by people around the area. At the same time there was an aura of silence around them and the rumors never reached health care.

At that time, there had come another intruder to the area, one that was stronger and had more long-lasting plans for the area than the earlier temporary visits of the district-court and the church, and who came to stay, the forest companies. Through changes in the international economy forest had become a fortune. This view of the forest was foreign to the Finns, for them the forest was not an asset, it was a wealth full of animals to hunt, their home, their soul. It is hard to believe that the Finns were aware of what changes the intrusion of the forest companies would mean for them. The forest companies came slowly from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and bought up part for part of the forest from the Finns. For tens of years the companies and the Finns lived together in a mutual misunderstanding and wonder about the actions of the other part.

This situation is described by a casual visitor, Professor Gunnar Andersson from the Norwegian Forestry Institute, who 1902 writes about the area. "The old traditions, the old language, the old customs, the old names of mountains, lakes and valleys disappear, but the inclinations and habits of the old forest life stubbornly remain. The Finns look with wonder and



incomprehension at the new men and the new times, who work and grind, improve and toil, without necessity forcing them to do so. In return, the newcomers also look without understanding at these 'lazy Finnish men' who let everything fall into disrepair, shun efforts as far as lying in the forest poaching or by the forest lake fishing, who refrain from unless the profit is significant and obvious, but who nevertheless look down with barely concealed contempt on these slaves of work who penetrate their forests." (Heggstad 1983 p 28/ref 4)

In the period 1924-1934 the contradictions reached a limit and crashed. It crashed in the question about hunting, for which the forest companies had little understanding. At that time the forest companies had bought up all the forest and through their large land holdings also gained power over the third of the forest which had been set aside for general use. The Finns did not want to work in the forest and forest workers had to be called in from other areas. The forest companies were dissatisfied with this and wanted a permanent forest worker group. They even introduced so-called "colonats", a piece of land was given to landless people provided they farmed the land and worked full-time in the forest. The land was poor and the project was canceled around 1925.

The 1930s were years of need in Sweden. It was scarce of food and all the men in whole villages were out hunting moose at illegal times, according to the traditional way of coping with periods of famine. When the forestry companies discovered the hunt, the sheriff was called and if the men were caught, they sentenced to jail. In this situation the suicide wave broke out. Here comes the first suicide I heard about. A man tells about a relative who went to prison for poaching and shot himself when he got out. Another man had always the rifle with him out in the woods. For that reason, the forestry companies did not want to hire him and then he shot himself.

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After 1924, male suicides continued to occur regularly by 5-8 suicides each 10 years until the late of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the regularity of the suicides, a high depopulation caused by a scarcity of jobs made the incidence (number of suicides/100.000 men/year) gradually increase and it was from the 1970s 2-3 times higher than the national average. In around half of the men, the method was shooting.

## THE ENDING OF THE SUICIDE WAVE

In 2019, an update was done of the number of suicides in the area during the three 10-years periods (1988-2017) that followed my survey, which was completed in 1986. The update is based on the Cause of Death Register, National Board of Health and Welfare.

During the first period, 1988-1997, there were 4 suicides by shooting in the area. Compared to the period 1974-1984 when 8 suicides were committed by men, of which 6 by shooting, the number of suicides among men had been reduced by half. No suicides were committed by women.

In the period 1998-2007 there was one unsafe suicide stated that was done by another method. It is probably a woman.

During the period 2008-2017 one safe suicide was committed by shooting. The man who took his life was known in the village to have mental problems. No unsafe suicides occurred and none in women. The suicide incidence was in this period 26/100.000 men/year, compared with the national average where the number of suicides was 22/100.000/year.

Women in the village I have talked to explain the decline of the number of suicides by saying that the society has totally changed. They mention the following changes:

1. The first thing the women mention is the so called “paternity leave”, a new regulation that make men and woman share the custody of the children. By that, the men have come to take more responsibility for the family. Some women now participate in the elk hunt and in a newly formed scooter club that is popular. By that, the difference between men’s and the women’s spheres have decreased.
2. Initiated by some enterprising men there had been a refurbishment of old memorials from the Finnish culture, that are found all over the area. It has been accomplished by a joint work of men and women and project groups from the school. A small national park on the western side has been upgraded. A forest museum where old forest machines have been collected has been put in order. An old cobalt mine from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where nickel once was found, which previously lay open like a wound in the area surrounded by a simple wooden fence, has been renovated and equipped with a distinguished mineral museum. The common commitment has united men and women who previously lived in different worlds. The area has by that become an attractive tourist place that people are proud of.
3. An increased contact with the outside society has been formed through tourism, digital connectivity and people moved in, especially women due to lack of male jobs. Some of the women are daughters of families which earlier had been forced to leave the village during the high depopulation. The women come from another type of society, are used to participate actively in society and get involved in the problems of the village.

## PART 4. CULTURE ANALYSIS

From the point of view of any particular individual (cultural) symbols are largely given. He finds them already current in the community when he is born, and they remain, with some additions, subtractions, and partial alterations he may or not may have had a hand in, in circulation there after he dies. While he lives he uses them, or some of them, to put a construction upon the events through which he lives (Clifford Geertz, 1966).

Where is the symbolics of this culture?

For the men, it is a world of pride, of strength and ability, a realm where nothing is impossible, a world where he solves all problems himself and needs no help, a world of self-esteem, a world among other strong and competent men to which he belongs and there he is the one who shot the moose.

In reviewing the culture of the area, there are three domains that repeatedly come together, influence each other and transfer meaning to each other; the original Finnish culture, the forest and the hunt. They are situated at the top of the value scale for the man. They are embedded in his heart, anchored in his ability and in his duties, he identifies with them and they make him a real man, the male ideal.

Sherry Ortner (ref 5) has invented the concept of a "key symbol", a material object found in many cultures that collects and summarizes the most important meanings in the culture.

In Los, no other object could have this role for a man as much as his rifle. It gives him his life's greatest and most praised achievements. It is a part of many gratifying and celebrated events in his life and in his rite of passage. It enriches his joy in the free forest life. It strengthens his sense of fulfilling the male ideal. He identifies with it and his ability to use it is his greatest pride. To know how to handle a rifle is the best way for a man in his culture to become honored and respected.

To shoot his first moose is the mandoom test, that gives the boy an honored place in the hunting team as a man. It might also be his first step to become known as a good hunter in society. His status is graded according to the amount of thorns in the moose's crown and he can be rewarded with a prize in the team. He puts up the moose's crown on a wall inside the house or on

the front cabin of the house. Sometimes he puts his rifle on it. - Some men committed suicide on the spot where they had shot their first moose.

The rifles are still, or were at least in the 1980s, inherited by the oldest son and he may place it, whether he hunts or not, on a visible place in his home, maybe in a position over his desk or on the wall.

The rifle has its ultimate origin in the old Finnish culture. The guns that the Finns made from bog-ore and charcoal from coal mines were the masterpiece of what a man can do by his own work. The early guns were known and prized far and wide and were the men's pride. Today, they are highlights in the tourist showing of the old house "Bortomåa (beyond the river)" in Fågelsjö, another village in the area. You can see the 13 flintlock guns on the opposite wall just as you step over the threshold to the kitchen, with the old farmer's triumphant warning; "The guns are loaded", with the accessories, the bullet punch, the gun power and the hunting horn, on which you can still blow "Alles tot (all are dead)". The armory has been restored and courses are still given in the old technique. Although the rifles are now machine-made, the old meaning remains.

When the man uses his rifle for a suicide it has all these meanings embodied. When he uses his most valued object, the symbol for all he had in life in a suicide, it is not a tool, it tells something, it gives a message. It is not a regret either, it is not an excuse. It is an act of pride, of self-assertion, maybe protest, it is a demand to be heard. It is not a begging, it is an endorsement. He asserts his right to belong.

First of all, it is a tribute and a commitment to the values in the old Finnish culture in which he has lived. It is not an act of weakness. It follows all the rules in the male ideal. He does not complain, he does not ask for help, he takes the whole responsibility himself. Faced with the threat of being excluded from the culture he is in a critical situation there he has to decide between two things, to admit himself weak and incapable, or to take his own life. This interpretation is supported by the demonstrative touch that many suicides had especially during 1924-1934, the period when shooting became the principal method for men's suicides.

He also, naturally, experiences all the difficult feelings of anxiety, depression, disappointment, fear in what has happened and the step he is prepared to take, but he might come to condemn these feelings as a sign of weakness which he must free himself from because they prevent him from being a man. To treat him, that doctor must give him an alternative that keeps his pride.

The values that the rifle expresses are probably also there in the thoughts of other men who hear about the suicide. A man who had left the area told that suicide was always discussed among the men in his village, "it was as if you had to shoot yourself". The message in the suicide was received and respected by other men, "at least he shot himself". By the men, but not by the women, who called it a stupidity.

But there was also the "hunting team". The subject was tabooed but there were some men who were silently opposed to the suicides. They gave no pills, they made a refurbishment.

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In this research, I have put forward the idea that when the rifle, which is the key to the male community and symbolizes the men's successes, is used in suicide, this is a confession to the male norm and a form of self-assertion and restoration.

## THE CULTURE IN THE 1980s

The original Finnish culture has a strong "positive value" in the area especially for the men. Gradually, more concentrated settlements, villages, were formed, which became the centers of family formation and children, and which were more closely connected with the world outside the village through schools, municipal activities, church, health care, all of which had their center and were regulated by laws created outside the village. In this context, the village is at a disadvantage and suffers from depopulation and lack of jobs which requires a constant struggle to maintain the functions there still are.

It was above all the women who came to act in this context, which compared to the men made them more familiar with the way of thinking in the new Swedish culture, which they gradually came to embrace. The men were therefore at a disadvantage in the village, where their merits were not an asset and they had less contact with these problems because both their work and their leisure activities were in the forest outside the village.

The men's contact with the outside world was above all through the forest work, which from the middle of the 20th century came to be more and more administered from outside. The forestry companies were – despite a constant latent caution and dissatisfaction among the people - after all for most men the only possibility to stay in the area. The conflicts and

disagreements with them that could blow up about special issues were at this time political, not suicidal, and united men and women.

For the men, the forest and the hunting, reinforced by the connection to the original culture, had a very high emotional “value”, it was the whole “meaning” in living and for staying in the area despite difficulties, a meaning that was not covered in the same way by the women, who could move away more easily. The hunt rewarded male achievements and thus also had great value in the maintenance of the male ideal with its descent from the Finns. Men had a greater self-worth in the forest. When they were in the village they were at a disadvantage compared to the women's skills. There was an underlying schism between the men and the women, who wanted more help. The men were vulnerable to the criticism from the women because it threatened their self-image and free life in the forest. The Finns, for whom nothing was said to have been impossible, was the ideal the men aspired to. The male ideal expressed values in the old culture.

Suicide had a “meaning” and a “positive value” in this context, because the method of suicide, shooting, was connected with the hunt and was seen as a brave act, which increased – or restored – the man's value in the hunting situation. Its “meaning” was to provide an imaginary possibility to remain within the original culture freed from his weaknesses, even when he was threatened by disease and events that weakened him.

The alternative, the village, was nothing that attracted him because there he had a weaker role and felt more strongly the weaknesses from which he wanted to escape. Suicide was a way to escape, to recover from a series of events that violated the male ideal and evoked shame and guilt in him. Suicide could be seen as a way to maintain the male ideal, as a path to restoration and redress. Different meanings in the old Finnish culture, the forest, the hunt and the value in the male role were woven together. A suicide had a “meaning” in this context. For the women, who were closer to the new culture, the value of suicide was only negative.



**Image text:** *Example of temporary living conditions for the forest worker cutting down large parts of the forest for the big international companies.*

The events that have taken place since my time in the village have moved the original culture into the community through the renovation of old Finnish memorials situated closer to the villages. It has also brought the old culture closer to the women and children, who now take an active part in the commitment.

At the same time, the refurbishment and upgrading of the village has increased the man's value in the village because his skills are needed in this work and this has made him highly valued in society. In this way, men are no longer strangers in the village but have gained a central position. As the original culture is also embodied in the village, the need for a forest life separated from the village is reduced. The men are now also said to take a greater part in the work in municipal committees. In this way, the contradictions between the worlds of men and women have been reduced or have disappeared.

This means that the previous connection between the forest and the old culture no longer is necessary. The function of the suicides to maintain contact with the original culture and the male ideal can be realized in the village in another way. The suicides thereby lose their “meaning” and significance and reduce. What remains are suicides rooted in individual causes, like divorce, addiction and mental diseases, which may have existed before reinforced by the connection to the male ideal.

#### Footnot.

In his analysis of suicide in Tikopia, Raymond Firth perceived suicide as a social act which can “be understood only in the context of other social acts by the person himself and of other members of his society.” (Firth, 1961).

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