



## A TRAGIC MYTH AND A RHETORICAL QUESTION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON A LÉVI-STRAUSS PASSAGE

### UM MITO TRÁGICO E UMA PERGUNTA RETÓRICA ALGUMAS REFLEXÕES SOBRE UMA PASSAGEM DE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Flávio Ribeiro de Oliveira<sup>1</sup>

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, analiso a estratégia retórica que orienta a afirmação feita por um membro da elite paulista (e relatada por Lévi-Strauss em *Tristes Trópicos*) de que os colonizadores portugueses haviam exterminado todos os indígenas brasileiros, e de que um dos métodos de extermínio fora a oferta aos indígenas de roupas contaminadas pela varíola. Comparo a estrutura desse relato com a estrutura de mitos gregos como o de Medeia e o de Dejanira e busco demonstrar que o padrão subjacente a esse tipo de relato é o da negação do *outro* para, em oposição a esse *outro*, afirmar certa identidade étnica e cultural.

**Palavras-chave:** mito de Medeia, mito de Dejanira, indígenas americanos

**Resumé:** Dans cet article, j'analyse la stratégie rhétorique qui oriente l'affirmation d'un membre de l'élite de l'État de São Paulo (rapportée par Lévi-Strauss dans *Tristes Tropiques*) que les colons portugais avaient exterminé tous les indigènes brésiliens et que l'une des méthodes d'extermination était l'offre aux indigènes de vêtements infectés par la variole. Je compare la structure de ce récit avec la structure de mythes grecs comme celui de Médée ou celui de Déjanire et je cherche à démontrer que le paradigme sous-jacent à ce genre de récit est celui de la négation de l'*autre* pour, en opposition à cet *autre*, affirmer une certaine identité ethnique et culturelle.

**Mots-clés:** mythe de Médée, mythe de Déjanire, indigènes américains

When, a few years ago, I read *Tristes Tropiques*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a reference made by the ethnologist to the “favorite hobby” (“le passe-temps favori”) of the elite of the state of São Paulo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century caught my attention: “recueillir dans les hôpitaux les vêtements infectés des victimes de la variole, pour aller les accrocher avec d’autres présents le long des sentiers encore fréquentés par les tribus. Grâce à quoi fut obtenu ce brillant résultat: l’État de São Paulo [...] ne comptait, quand j’y arrivai en 1935, plus un seul indigène” (1955, p. 49-50)<sup>2</sup>.

The shocking statement (whose source Lévi-Strauss does not mention<sup>3</sup>) that the white elite, with the deliberate purpose of killing the indigenous, offered them, as gifts,

<sup>1</sup> Professor at the State University of Campinas, Unicamp, Campinas, SP, Brazil. frasp@unicamp.br  
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4602-6981>

<sup>2</sup> “To call at the hospital for the clothes left behind by those who had died of small-pox: these they would then strew, together with other presents, along the lanes still used by the natives. This brought about the following brilliant result: [...] not one single native Indian was left at the time of my arrival in 1935” (translation by John Russell, 1961, p. 51).

<sup>3</sup>From the context, we can assume that the Lévi-Strauss informant was one of the “*gran finos*” (as Lévi-Strauss called the Brazilian elite of the 1930s) that he met or in Paris, shortly before his first trip to Brazil, or already in Brazil, in São Paulo, in 1935: in the same passage from the book (p. 49), the author reproduces

infected garments, made me think of the *tópos* of the gift from the enemy, that causes death and disaster<sup>4</sup> (found, for example, in the Greek myth of the Trojan horse and in that of the deadly robe which Deianeira, by scheming of Nessus, offers to Heracles) – and, more specifically, it reminded me of the myth of Medea, as Euripides presented it in his *Medea*.

Medea was furious because her husband, Jason, had left her to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. The witch plots revenge: she pretends to accept the situation and has her children bring to the princess, as a sign of goodwill, a finely woven dress and a golden diadem. Medea, however, anoints the gifts with powerful poisons. The king's daughter accepts the gifts and tries them on. Immediately, the garments start to burn her skin, and she dies a horrible death. Her father hugs the body and also dies in an atrocious way (Euripides, 2006).

The parallelism with the episode reported by Lévi-Strauss is clear: both cases address different ethnic groups: there, Medea is barbarian, while Creon and his daughter are Greek; here, white people are opposed to native people. In both cases, one employs cunning against his enemies, pretending to offer them gifts. In both cases, the gifts are garments. In both cases, the gifts are deliberately contaminated with a lethal substance, and those who receive the gifts ignore it. One can also note an analogy in the igniferous action of the lethal clothing: in Medea's case, literally: the garments burn the flesh of Creon and of the princess. In the case mentioned by Lévi-Strauss, symbolically: the indigenous died of smallpox, feverish<sup>5</sup>.

The deliberate contamination of American indigenous is mentioned by several sources and documents between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries: the case referred by Lévi-Strauss has its precedents. The earliest record dates back to the sixteenth century: a report made by a Peruvian indigenous relates that the Spanish sent, through a messenger, a gift to the Inca king: it was a small box tightly closed. The messenger insisted that only the king should open it. Once it was opened, the smallpox spread among the Incas and many died<sup>6</sup>. The parallels with the myth of Medea are evident: 1) there is the presence of an intermediary who brings the fatal gift to the victim (in the case of the Peruvian report, the messenger; in the myth of Medea, her children); 2) there is the fact that the offer must be delivered to the recipient at hand (in the Peruvian story, there was the explicit instruction that the box was only to be opened by the recipient; in the case of Medea, the children's mother recommends that they deliver the gifts into the hands of the princess; see Eurípides (2006, p. 120, verses 972-973): *kósmōn didóntes – toûde gàr málista deî – / es kheîr ekeínes dôra déxasthai táde*<sup>7</sup>; 3) finally, in both reports the recipient has royal status.

The first mention of the deliberate use of contaminated garments or blankets to exterminate the indigenous refers to the Pontiac's rebellion, where indigenous of the Great Lakes region rose up against British troops. To contaminate the indigenous, Lord

---

statements made by Luiz de Souza-Dantas (then Brazilian ambassador in Paris) that concur with the anecdote reported above.

<sup>4</sup>On disastrous gifts given by enemies, Ajax says, in Sophocles' *Ajax*, that gifts from enemies are not gifts: *ekhthrôn ádōra dôra kouk onésima* (verse 665). See Sófocles, 2008, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>In reports – fabulous or historical – of deliberate contamination through clothing, there is a constant: “literal or symbolic fire consumes victims [...] Fevers and inflammation are universally described in terms of burning and vice-versa” (Mayor, 1995, p. 65).

<sup>6</sup>See Wright, 1992, p. 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> “[...] offering gifts – and this is the most important: that she receive these gifts in her own hands” (my translation).

Amherst has supposedly offered them, in 1763, blankets utilized by British soldiers who died of smallpox<sup>8</sup>.

Reports of deliberate contamination of indigenous people by offering them clothing contaminated with smallpox are numerous, especially in North America. In Brazil, such narratives also circulate. Silvano Sabatini (1998) reports that “in Bahia, farmers and politicians wiped two whole communities inoculating the smallpox virus in the Pataxós”, and: “to exterminate the Beço-de-pau, [...] in several villages airplanes threw toys contaminated with influenza, measles, and smallpox viruses”<sup>9</sup>.

However, modern historians are not unanimous as to the reliability of many of these accounts. While a few are well-documented, most of them have the character of local legend<sup>10</sup>. In a lucid and well-reasoned article published in 1995, Adrienne Mayor meticulously examines several of these reports and the documents that, eventually, support or contradict them. Mayor calls our attention to the *legendary* character of many of these reports: “it takes on the character of a contemporary legend because details such as time and place are mutable, it relates shocking events that counter accepted values, it is perpetuated by believers and nonbelievers, interpretation is controversial, and each retelling usually entails moral judgment”<sup>11</sup>.

I think that Adrienne Mayor is right to point out the legendary character of this kind of narrative. However, following her article, she is not particularly fortunate to search the old paradigm in the Deianeira myth, instead of the myth of Medea. The version of the Deianeira myth that Mayor adopts is the one told by Sophocles in *Women of Trachis*. I reproduce below the passage in which Mayor exposes the mythical passage that interests her: “According to myth, Heracles shot the centaur Nessus with an arrow poisoned with the blood of the Hydra, as Nessus was abducting Heracles's wife Deianeira. The dying centaur advised Deianeira to collect blood from his wound (or to take his blood-soaked tunic) and save it in an airtight container. If Heracles ever strayed, he claimed, she could win him back by imbuing clothing with the substance as a love charm. When, years later, Heracles took a younger wife, Deianeira reluctantly anointed a tunic, locked it in a chest, and sent it to Heracles, instructing that no one should touch it but her husband. After the messenger left, Deianeira was horrified to notice that a bit of the treated wool had fallen on the courtyard, where it immediately incinerated the stones. Meanwhile, Heracles proudly donned the new robe to perform a special sacrifice. As soon as the material became warm, profuse sweat broke out and the poison began to corrode his skin, eating into his flesh as his blood ‘hissed and bubbled’ [...] Roaring and running in agony, Heracles tries to rip off the garment, but it clings so that flesh tears away with it. Looking at his ravaged body, he despairs of his lost beauty and strength and resolves to die” (1995, p. 62).

This report nearly resumes, point by point, the action of Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*. It is true that there are common structural elements between this myth and the cases of deliberate contamination of indigenous communities through the offering of

---

<sup>8</sup>See Parkman, 1991, p. 646 *sqq.* The first edition of his book is from 1851.

<sup>9</sup> Sabatini, 1998, p. 79: “Na Bahia, fazendeiros e políticos liquidaram duas comunidades inteiras inoculando o vírus da varíola nos Pataxós”; “para liquidar os Beço-de-pau, [...] em várias aldeias, aviões lançavam brinquedos contaminados com vírus de gripe, sarampo e varíola”.

<sup>10</sup> See De Voto, 1947, p. 281: in general, this type of report has a “quality of legend”. The fear of epidemics favored the emergence of rumors and legends about the subject, and, although it is undeniable that some of these reports are well-documented historical facts, it is difficult to verify the historical accuracy of a large number of cases. For example, Silvano Sabatini (who, in his book *Massacre*, generally documents accurately all the claims he makes and mentions his sources wisely) never identifies the sources of his information when he reports cases of deliberate contamination of indigenous people (see Sabatini, 1998, p. 79).

<sup>11</sup> Mayor, 1995, p. 55.

garments deliberately infected by European settlers: we have, in both cases, the offer of a lethal clothing and its caustic effect on the one who accepts the present (in the Greek myth, the fire is literal; in the modern accounts, it takes the form of a fever). However, there is a fundamental difference (neglected by Mayor): the contamination of the indigenous was deliberate; the person who sent the gift had a clear and deliberate intention to cause death to the person who received the gift. The settlers adopted a willful policy of extermination of the indigenous. In the Deianeira myth (at least in the version told by Sophocles – and that Mayor adopts), the wife of Heracles is a victim of Nessus' cunning and ignores the actual effect of the substance with which she anointed the tunic. Deianeira had not, in any way, the intention to kill Heracles. In this respect, it is the Medea myth that presents a much more complete and clear analogy regarding the modern reports: Medea – just as the white settler – know exactly what she is doing; she has the *deliberate* purpose of causing the death of those to whom she offers the gifts. The myth of Medea, thus, offers us a better structural paradigm to understand this genre of modern storytelling.

However, also the paradigm of Deianeira would be acceptable if we did not adopt the Sophoclean version of the myth (as did Mayor), but a supposedly previous version, according to the theory proposed by Ignacio Errandonea (1927). For him, in previous versions of the myth, Deianeira acted as intentionally as Medea (Errandonea supposes that the unconscious and innocent Deianeira that appears on *Women of Trachis* has been a later invention)<sup>12</sup>. According to Errandonea, the primitive mythical figure of Deianeira has been designed along the lines of Medea<sup>13</sup>. In the original myth Deianeira was, according to Errandonea, a barbaric and violent woman that responded to the infidelity of her husband by poisoning him deliberately<sup>14</sup>: this version, says Errandonea, corresponds to the popular etymology of her name (ΔΕΙ-ΑΝΕΙΡΑ, “hominum destructricem”<sup>15</sup>). Mayor, however, does not mention this version of the myth and shows no knowledge of either Errandonea's article, or of the most recent literature on the subject: the version adopted by her is the one we find in the traditional readings of *Women of Trachis*.

Either way, I believe that both myths – both the Medea and the Deianeira ones – have a common element that is essential to understand the structure of the narratives concerning the spread of smallpox among the indigenous: it is the notion of *otherness*. It is this particular aspect that interests me, especially from the rhetorical point of view. Once the paradigm of Medea seems more appropriate (as I tried to demonstrate) to

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Hester, 1980, p. 5: “It is surely reasonable to suppose that in the original version of the saga she killed him deliberately, and that the innocent Deianeira found in Bacchylides 16 is an innovation”. For Malcon Davies, “the innocent Deianeira, whose murder of Heracles is tragically inadvertent, will be a latter invention, perhaps the brain-child of Sophocles” (1989, p. 469). Jebb already considered Sophocles the creator of the new Deianeira prototype – “a perfect type of gentle womanhood” (1892, p. XXXI-XXXII). The oscillation in attributing to Bacchylides or to Sophocles the creation of the new Deianeira model is due to the fact that it is difficult to establish the relative dating of Bacchylides 16 and the *Trachiniae*.

<sup>13</sup> 1927, p. 149: “Sed omnium maxima est similitudo Trachiniarum cum Medea Euripidis” (“But the greatest of all is the similarity of *Women of Trachis* to Euripides' *Medea*”; my translation).

<sup>14</sup> Errandonea goes even further and tries to show that, even in Sophocles, Deianeira still has a violent character and deliberately sends the poisoned robe to Heracles: Sophocles has not innovated. Nowadays, this reading that Errandonea made of *Women of Trachis* is unanimously rejected (see Davies, 1989, p. 469: this reading “has rightly met with general rejection”). Hester (1980, p. 5 *sqq.*) convincingly demonstrates that there is no evidence to confirm Errandonea's reading (see p. 7: “the evidence against Deianeira does not stand up”). I think, as Pozzi (and against Errandonea), that the Deianeira from *Women of Trachis*, far from being a violent and cunning woman who deliberately planned the death of Heracles, is rather “another great tragic Sophoclean figure who, like Oedipus, unwittingly commits a terrible act totally alien to her true character” (Pozzi, 1996, p. 105).

<sup>15</sup> 1927, p. 147 (“destroyer of men”). Chantraine (1968, p. 271) interprets “qui tue son mari” (“who kills her husband”).

understand the modern narratives of the intentional contamination of indigenous people, I will now address the issue of otherness in the *Medea* of Euripides (2006).

I am interested in the rhetorical establishment, in the speeches of the characters and the Chorus, of an opposition between the foreign and the indigenous. When Medea first addresses the Chorus of Corinthian women, she highlights the contrasts between the situation of these women – who have a city, a father's house and friends (p. 54, verses 253-254) – and her own: alone and stateless (*ápolis*). Medea presents herself as a spoil brought from a barbaric land (p. 54, verses 255-256). The situation of Medea is not governed by the same logic (*ou ... autòs ... lógos*, p. 54, verse 252) that governs the situation of the women of the Chorus. In the first stasimon, the Chorus also characterizes the situation of Medea as that of someone who lives in a foreign land: *epì dè xénaí naíeis khthoní*, (p. 70, verses 434-435). This theme will be brought again by Jason, in his dialogue with Medea in the second episode (p. 80, verses 536-537: Medea, a foreigner, now inhabits the Greek land and not a barbarian soil). According to Medea, Jason has abandoned her because he felt distaste for such a barbarian marriage (*bárbaron lékhos*, p. 84, verses 591-592). The Chorus, in the second stasimon, expressed the desire to never become stateless (*ápolis*) as Medea (p. 90, verses 643-644). In the third episode, directing herself to the Chorus, Medea brings up again the idea that she has no country (*oúte moi patrís*, p. 104, verse 798). In the exodus, after the murder of his sons, Jason tells Medea that no Greek woman would have dared to do so (p. 154, verses 1339-1340). Jason, who deceived Medea, is, for her, a deceiver of foreigners (*xeinapátou*, p. 160, verse 1392).

Throughout the tragedy, it is rhetorically constructed, therefore, a clear opposition between the barbarian woman, who comes from outside – Medea – and the local people (the Corinthians or the Greeks).

Medea, who comes from a foreign land, offers garments deliberately poisoned to the king's daughter, indigenous, to kill her. I have already shown how this mythical structure gives account of the situation reported by Lévi-Strauss: the colonizer, who comes from outside, gives garments deliberately poisoned to the natives to kill them. In both cases the relationship between the killer and the murdered is one of *otherness*: the killer kills the *other*, and not his peers. My view is that the relation of otherness is essential to the structure of this mythic model.

\*\*\*

From this perspective, I return to that passage from Lévi-Strauss. In *Tristes Tropiques*, the ethnologist takes as *factual information* the report made by some member of the São Paulo elite. It seems, however, that before taking it as a completely reliable information, it would be appropriate to make a rhetorical question: why a member of the Brazilian elite would calmly tell that his ancestors murdered indigenous by giving them infected garments? What rhetorical strategy would be behind the brutal statement made by the “*gran fino*” who transmitted the anecdote to Lévi-Strauss?

Now, this statement, at a first glance, brings an inevitable moral implication: “my forefathers killed indigenous; therefore, they were murderers”. However, considered from the perspective of the structure that organizes the myth of Medea (in which the *otherness* is an essential element, and, therefore, the one who sends poisoned gifts does not belong to the same race or nation that those who receive them), we may adduce a second implication, not so explicit – but perhaps more important from the viewpoint of the speaker's rhetorical strategy: by saying “my ancestors killed indigenous”, the speaker assumes (and hopes that their interlocutor also assumes) the following necessary corollary: “ergo, my ancestors were not indigenous: my ancestors killed *the other*, and

not their peers. The indigenous is the other”. As in the myth of Medea, the foreign killed the native.

Such an intention of withdrawing ethnically and culturally from the indigenous element by affirming the otherness of the indigenous is explicit in these complacent words from the ambassador Souza-Dantas (reported in the same passage of *Tristes Tropiques*), who has allegedly said to Lévi-Strauss: “Des Indiens? Hélas, mon cher Monsieur, mais voici des lustres qu’ils ont tous disparu. Oh, c’est là une page bien triste, bien honteuse, dans l’histoire de mon pays. Mais les colons portugais du XVIIe siècle étaient des hommes avides et brutaux. Comment leur reprocher d’avoir participé à la rudesse générale des mœurs? Ils se saisissaient des Indiens, les attachaient à la bouche des canons et les déchiquetaient vivants à coups de boulets. C’est ainsi qu’on les a eus, jusqu’au dernier” (1955, p. 49)<sup>16</sup>. Souza-Dantas made clear the idea that his ancestors – and our ancestors – are the foreign settlers who unfortunately (“hélas”, he says, with an ill-concealed self-complacency) killed all the natives.

We saw above that reports of murder of indigenous through the offer of contaminated garments assumed a mythical character and began to circulate diffusely throughout North America since the eighteenth century, and that it is impossible, in many cases, to distinguish the historical elements from the fabulous ones. The question I propose, with respect to the report reproduced in *Tristes Tropiques*, is as follows: did the São Paulo elite of 1930 imitate the method or did they imitate the myth? Did they effectively adopt a method utilized by the elite of the most developed and Europeanized America to exterminate the indigenous peoples (the method of offering contaminated garments to them), or did they just adopt, to build their identity, a myth already widespread in North America (the myth that our *white* ancestors systematically poisoned the indigenous)? Note that by utilizing the term “myth” I do not mean to deny, of course, the reality of the systematic genocidal practices by the settlers of the Americas. I refer only to the fact that the reports that emerged from these practices assumed, in many cases, a legendary character and have the structure of a myth, as shown, for example, by Adrienne Mayor and Bernard De Voto in the works already mentioned.

My suggestion is that the story reported by Lévi-Strauss was not primarily concerned with historical facts<sup>17</sup>, but represented the deliberate adoption, by the Brazilian elite of the early twentieth century, of a mythic paradigm that contributed to forge, for themselves, a white and European ethnic and cultural identity, as opposed to the indigenous element. The political elite of São Paulo in 1930 meant to show that we are not indigenous: like the North Americans, we too have white ancestors. The indigenous is the *other*. The foundation of the university in which Lévi-Strauss came to work was part of this policy, which included an ideological project of Westernizing and whitening the country. That is why the other – the indigenous – was denied. The *other* died. Our white ancestors killed him.

\*\*\*

Certainly there were, in Brazil’s history, attempts to exterminate indigenous through the offer of contaminated garments or objects. However, these events are poorly

---

<sup>16</sup> “Indians? [...] Alas, my dear sir, the Indians have all been dead and gone for many a year. It’s a sad page – yes, and a shameful one – in the history of my country. But the Portuguese colonists in the sixteenth century were a brutal, money-grubbing lot. Who are we to reproach them if they behaved as everyone else behaved at that time? They used to grab hold of the Indians, tie them to the cannons’ mouth, and blow them to pieces. That’s how they went, every man Jack of them” (Russell’s translation, 1961, p. 50-51).

<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Souza-Dantas’ report, historical inexactitude is evident: the indigenous were not *all* exterminated.

documented and have been reported mainly orally, through stories that repeat the structure of ancient myths – comparable, for example, to the Greek myth of Medea. In this article, I sought to suggest the hypothesis that the São Paulo elite of the 1930s rhetorically employed such reports in order to forge a white and European cultural identity for themselves, in which the indigenous element was excluded: to admit that our forefathers have exterminated the indigenous implies the fact that the indigenous is the *other* and that, therefore, we are not indigenous.

---

## REFERENCES

- CHANTRAINE, P. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. V. 1*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1968.
- DAVIES, M. “Deianeira and Medea: a foot-note to the pre-history of two myths”. *Mnemosyne*, fourth series, v. 42, 1989, p. 469-472.
- DE VOTO, B. *Across the wide Missouri*. Boston: H. Mifflin, 1947.
- ERRANDONEA, IGN. “Deianira vere ΔΗΙ-ΑΝΕΙΡΑ”. *Mnemosyne*, new series, v. 55, 1927, p. 145-164.
- EURÍPIDES *Medéia. Tradução, introdução e notas de Flávio Ribeiro de Oliveira*. São Paulo: Odysseus, 2006.
- HESTER, D. A. “Deianeira’s deception speech”. *Antichthon*, 14, 1980, p. 1-8.
- JEBB, R.C. (ed) *Sophocles, part 5, The Trachiniae*. Cambridge: University Press, 1892.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. *Tristes tropiques*. Paris: Plon, 1955 (English translation by John Russell. New York: Criterion, 1961).
- MAYOR, A. “The Nessus shirt in the New World: smallpox blankets in history and legend”. *The Journal of American Folklore*, v. 108, n. 427, 1995, p. 54-77.
- PARKMAN, F. *The Oregon trail and the conspiracy of Pontiac*. New York: Classics, 1991.
- POZZI, D. “Deianeira uere Oenei filia”. *Hermes*, 124, 1996, p. 104-108.
- SABATINI, S. *Massacre*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1998.
- SÓFOCLES. *Aias. Apresentação e tradução de Flávio Ribeiro de Oliveira*. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2008.
- SÓFOCLES. *As Traquínias. Apresentação, tradução e comentário filológico de Flávio Ribeiro de Oliveira*. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2009.
- WRIGHT, R. *Stolen continents. The America through indian eyes since 1492*. Boston: H. Mifflin, 1992.

Recebido: 4/2/2023

Aceito: 1/9/2023

Publicado: 19/9/2023