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## IRACEMA, THE HONEY-LIPPED VIRGIN: DENIAL AND AFFIRMATION OF INDIGENEITY IN CONTEMPORARY CEARÁ

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the romantic image of Iracema – a literary figure created by Ceará-born writer José de Alencar. The best-known character from José de Alencar’s literary output, Iracema is examined here as a symbol of Cearense-ness and indigenusness evoked in everyday discursive representations both to deny and to affirm contemporary processes of indigenous identification. Ethnographic examples drawn from research carried out with indigenous leaders of several peoples in Ceará (Pitaguary, Tapeba, Tremembé, Jenipapo-Kanindé and Potyguara) reveal that while the image of Iracema is commonly used to de-authorise those who claim specific ethnic-racial identities, it is also appropriated by these people to affirm their indigenusness.

#### palavras-chave

Iracema, indigenusness,  
indigenous identification,  
*mestiçagem*.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I explore the romantic image of Iracema – a literary figure created by José de Alencar – as a symbol of Cearense-ness and indigenusness evoked in the discursive representations of everyday life in Ceará in order to both deny and simultaneously affirm contemporary processes of indigenous identification. Ethnographic examples drawn from field research carried out in Ceará state over a decade (1998-2008) with indigenous leaders from the Pitaguary, Tapeba, Tremembé, Jenipapo-Kanindé and Potyguara peoples demonstrate that while the image-symbol of Iracema is used to de-authorise those who demand recognition of their ethnic-racial identity, it is also appropriated as a reference point or model of indigenusness that serves precisely to authenticate a process of self-identification in which people conceive themselves primarily as indigenous, at the same time as they perceive themselves to belong to mixed populations – of *caboclos*,<sup>1</sup> *negros*, *sertanejos*<sup>2</sup> or simply ‘mixed Indians’ (*índios misturados*), revealing a living context in which the various forms of identity categorization do not exclude an emphasis on the notion of indigenusness.

Although frequently associated with the idea of racial and ethnic purity, Iracema – both in José de Alencar’s tale and in the national imagination even today – encounters the white foreigner to give birth to the first Brazilian, the first Cearense, at once indigenous and non-indigenous, a ‘mixed’ entity containing both parts within itself. The focus of this article is precisely this imaginary connection with the figure of Iracema, a connection mobilized in order to affirm and deny, authorize and question, approach and distance local and current identifications. In other words, it looks to show that there are multiple possibilities for mobilizing the Iracema image-symbol.

## IRACEMA: FROM CHARACTER TO KIN

The first reference that many people have to Ceará is in the acclaimed novel by José de Alencar (1829-1877), *Iracema - Lenda do Ceará* (1865), which with *O Guarani* (1857) and *Ubirajara* (1874), comprise the author’s Indianist trilogy. José de Alencar and his character Iracema have for a long time been central reference points in Cearense cultural life where Fortaleza, the state capital, is very often referred to as Alencarina, in an allusion to its most

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1. TN: *caboclo*: someone of mixed indigenous and European ancestry.

2. TN: *sertanejo*: a native of the sertão, or outback.

illustrious son. In this setting, the statues of Iracema are among the city's most visited monuments, and during celebrations of its anniversary it is common for photos of the indigenous heroine to be published on the front-pages of local newspapers.

Some idea of the importance of this mythic figure can be gained by searching for 'Iracema' on the internet. This produces some fascinating results: thousands of entries appear, ranging from personal blogs on literature and politics to tourist information sites. Iracema is everywhere. The 'honey-lipped virgin' also proves an inspiration for wooden sculptures, oil paintings and postcards, often for sale in the state's more touristic regions.

José de Alencar (the writer, the official house, the theatre, the square in the city centre), as well as Iracema (the figure, the government buildings, the section of the urban seafront of Fortaleza and the aforementioned monuments) form part of the everyday life of the city where almost three million people live. The famous Iracema Beach combines legends, personal and collective memories, songs, poems, and certainly the photo album of many people from all over Brazil. The heart of Bohemian life in the capital for various years, Iracema Beach made the figure providing the location its name part of the personal lives of a generation of Fortaleza citizens, especially those belonging to the middle classes and elites, but not just them.

**figure 1**

The painting Iracema (1881), by José Maria de Medeiros, a Portuguese painter naturalized Brazilian, is now located in the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Brazil.



It is important to stress, however, that even before encountering the universe described above, every student from the public or private education system is exposed to the name of Iracema while still at school. Here, then, a brief immersion in the plot of the literary work will be useful. *Iracema – Lenda do Ceará* tells the story of a romance between Iracema, a kind of indigenous priestess, and Martim Soares Moreno, a Portuguese conquistador, in the sixteenth century. Known as the ‘honey-lipped virgin,’ the character Iracema, though exaggeratedly romantic, is depicted as an authentic representation of the indigenous person, or at least of the indigenous woman: beautiful, courageous, honest, generous and above all virginal.

Ceará itself, described as an idyllic land with an exuberant and exotic nature, provides the setting for the prohibited romance between Iracema and the white man, Martim. This place occupied by a majestic nature may also represent the country as a whole, or, who knows, perhaps the entire South American continent. Amid this nature, from Iracema’s passion for the conquistador, a child is born, the son of the forbidden union. Tragically, as we read in the book, the mother does not survive long, dying shortly after giving birth to the child. After Iracema’s death, her son is taken to the white man. He buries the body of his loved one next to his favourite coconut tree. The legend goes that Fortaleza was founded there where Iracema’s body was buried. Hence, as Fortalezenses, we have all been born from Iracema’s ashes.

**figure 2**

Iracema The Guardian is considered the second statue made in honour of José de Alencar’s character. Sculpted in iron, in 1960, by the Ceará-born artist Zenon Barreto, the statue was presented to the public in 1965, at the centenary of José de Alencar’s novel. Launched only in 1996, the statue is located at the Beach of Iracema, a tourist point in the city.



One hundred and fifty years have passed since the novel was first published in 1865. Over this century and a half, the allegory of racial integration told through the intercultural romance between Iracema and the white man has only grown in strength. Many readers continue to be enchanted by the poetic style of the narrative – a quality that tends to contribute to its romanticism. At the same time, since José de Alencar’s writing effectively blurs the distinction between historical facts and fiction, the book is often interpreted by readers as a kind of genealogy of Ceará. Indeed, Alencar’s narrative makes use of numerous references to the official history and oral tradition of local peoples. The name Martim, for example, is taken from a real historical figure, the founder of the state of Ceará. His name also metaphorically refers to Mars, the Roman god of war. Iracema, a name dreamt up by Alencar himself, is an anagram of America. The *mestiço* son who represents both the native continent and the colonizing warrior is Moacir: the child of pain, mourning or suffering. Over the course of the literary work and of history, Iracema, the indigenous element, is identified with the idea of Nature, while Martim, the white invader, represents power. The moral baseline to this narrative is that despite Iracema’s death, Moacir’s birth alludes to the future that awaits Brazil after the colonial encounter. Through Moacir, Nature and power combine to create a unique civilization.

In the words of Sommer, Iracema is a ‘foundational fiction’ (Sommer 1993; Irwin 2003) with a huge importance to the way in which Brazilians (and here I would add: more particularly Cearenses) see themselves. Sommer also argues that the characters of Alencar, as well as Iracema, Moacir and Peri, are “material proof that fiction is not exactly unreal.” Indeed, the “pain for which Iracema names her baby, and the saudade that he will surely feel for her, are as quintessentially Brazilian as his mestizo mix of races.” Moacir, Sommer emphasizes, is “where an unmistakably Brazilian past blends with an unpredictable future; he is the answer to Brazilianness, both Tupi and not Tupi” (1993, 171).

In Treece’s view, this romance comprises one of the first manifestations of one of the most influential traditions of thought on race relations and national identity in Brazil: “the tradition of *mestiço* nationalism,” which acquired “an ideological force that reached far beyond the Indianist movement itself” (2000, 179). This is because Alencar depicts “a noble Indian identity” which most people “can proudly accept from a historical distance without confronting the weightier ethno-political realities of their indigenous heritage” (Guyton 2005, p. 4), and also because of the notion of “a conciliary, collaborative relationship between races, on the basis of a history of intimate social and sexual contact” (Treece 2000, 179).

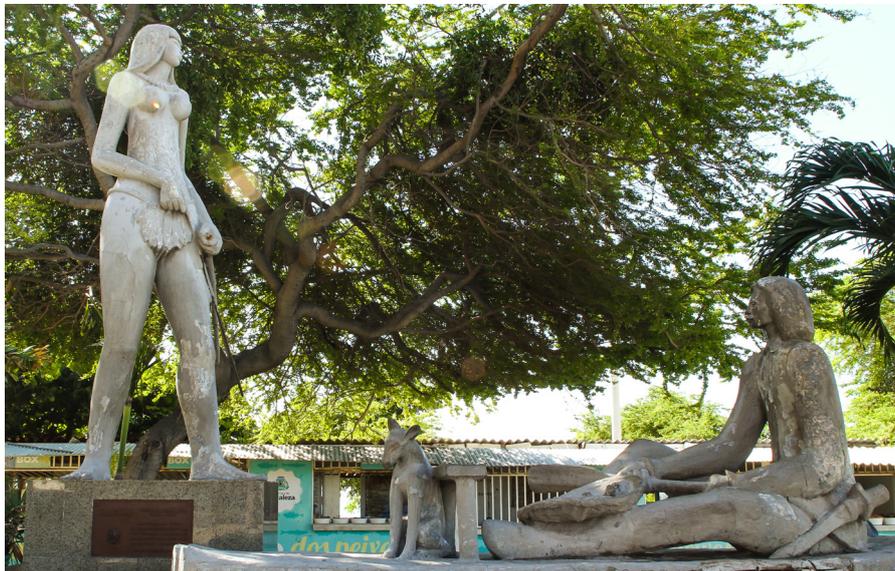
Just as we read in *Iracema*, within any apparent ‘collaborative relationship’ between the races, the existence of the indigenous subject must be “compromised either through ‘civilisation’ or death in order for their interracial union to bear fruit” (Guyton 2005, 3). In line with the tendency then prevalent in Latin America, in Alencar’s novels “the Indian only becomes intertwined into the fabric of the new society at the cost of his/her people, his/her traditions, and frequently, his/her life” (Guyton 2005, 3). Despite this central message, or perhaps because of it, *Iracema*’s tale has captured the imagination of generations of artists, intellectuals, teachers and students for around 150 years.

**figure 3 and 4**

The Statue of Iracema is the first monument that depicts the so-called “Virgin of Honey Lips”.

Launched in 1965, the statue was sculpted by Corbiniano Lins, from the Brazilian state of Pernambuco. The statue is located where according to the novel *Iracema* is said to expect the return of the White Warrior, Martim Soares Moreno.

There is also a representation of Iracema’s son, Moacir, and Japi, the dog.



According to the writer Raquel de Queiroz, Iracema, once the second most common name in the baptism registers of Ceará, after Maria, was transformed into a relative, a friend and a living figure in people's feelings. As Porto Alegre summarizes in her magnificent text on the symbolic dimension of the image of the Indian in Brazilian culture:

“Apropos the public's sympathy for the ‘heroine of divine resignation’ (in Machado de Assis's description), Câmara Cascudo (1951), in his wanderings through the interior, records that people were capable of repeating the first pages of *Iracema* word-for-word. And Rachel de Queiroz (1951) adds: ‘Peri, Ceci, Iracema, are relatives, friends, living figures in popular sentiment. They appear in the sertaneja ballads, in the carnival songs, in anecdotes, in choreography, in folklore,’ as well as appearing too in as luxurious collections and the comments of the erudite. (...) Completing this consecration, Gilberto Freyre (1955) enthrones Alencar as a kind of remote grandmother whose influence affected authors as diverse as Euclides da Cunha, Silvio Romero, Mário de Andrade, Roquette Pinto, Manuel Bandeira, Oswald de Andrade and Cassiano Ricardo. These tributes were repeated during the celebration of the book's centenary in 1965. Ninety Brazilian editions and sixteen Portuguese editions, as well as translations into other languages, had been published by that time (Doyle 1965). On the occasion, the José Olympio publishing house issued a special edition, organized by Cavalcanti Proença. The volume is opened by the critic and poet Manuel Bandeira with his *Louvado do Centenário de Iracema*, emphasizing once again the mythic dimension. Proença surveys and remarks on the more significant critical fortunes of the work and concludes: ‘For a hundred years it has stirred enthusiasm and aversion.’ He describes Alencar as a master of illusion, capable of stirring ‘this national lie without which no country can live,’ in which ‘the Non-Existent kills the Real.’ He compares Iracema and Martim to Rachel and Jacob as founders of an ‘illustrious tribe’ in foreign land, where the jandaia bird, the virgin's inseparable companion, is the symbol of Amerindian traditions, gods and rites, which vanish but return as soon as the foreigner goes away. The critic shows particular affection for Moacir: ‘the standard Brazilian, offspring of a happy Luso-Amerindian crossbreeding,’ in whom all the potential virtues of the people are deposited” (Porto Alegre 2003, 311-331).

The notion of *cearensidade* or ‘Cearense-ness,’ beyond the foundation of Fortaleza, is deeply connected to this popular image of Iracema. In electing Iracema as a foundational myth, the discourses generally

emphasize an indigenous ancestry, both in the language and in the toponymy and official history of Ceará. However, just as happens in José de Alencar's novel, frequently one hears that in order for us to exist as a nation, the Indian had to die. In other words, the indigenous person is part of our history as Brazilians, but above all as Cearenses. Indigenousness itself is relegated to a distant past, remembered only in the field of folklore and on commemorative dates. If indigenousness is recognized, this is only possibly – as in the literary work – through the existence of a process of mixture, since Moacir, like any other Cearense, is a direct descendent of an indigenous woman. This point seems of particular importance to me since it is through *mestiçagem*, so abundantly affirmed in the everyday discourses of the city, the state and the nation, that a space for indigenous identification continues to be possible.

### **THE DEBATE SURROUNDING *MESTIÇAGEM* IN BRAZIL AND LATIN AMERICA**

The publication of *Iracema* and its effects on the national conscience reflect a wider trend throughout Latin America. Various authors emphasize how racial and cultural mixture was a central theme in the scientific and intellectual debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Martínez-Echazabal (1998) explains, for example, that between 1850 and 1910 discourses on Latin American identity, development, progress and nationalism were commonly marked by an opposition between two “pseudo-polarities”: on one hand, a determinist discourse on naturally “inferior” races, founded on the theory of evolution and the principles of social darwinism; on the other, “a visionary faith in the political and social viability of increasingly hybridised populations” (Martínez-Echazabal 1998, 30).

For Martínez-Echazabal, those who defended the former viewpoint equated “miscegenation with barbarism and degeneration”, while the “adherents of the latter prescribed cross-racial breeding as the antidote to barbarism and the means to creating modern Latin American nation-states”. In the latter case, racial and cultural mixture was understood as a reconciliation process through which original identities eventually emerged. However, rather than comprising antitheses, these positions are “differently nuanced variations of essentially the same ideology”, one that was “philosophically and politically grounded in European liberalism and positivism, whose role it was to ‘improve’ the human race through ‘better breeding’ and to support and encourage Western racial and cultural supremacy” (Martínez-Echazabal 1998, 30). In other words, much more than reflecting the specific case of Ceará, or displaying a concern typical of Brazil's elites, the emergence

of the allegory of *Iracema* was in tune with the discussion then in vogue in Latin America as a whole, where rhetorical strategies for unification repeatedly emerged in nation-building discourses. Alencar's novel could even be said to fit into a general paradigm in which the idealization of indigenous people appears as a response to the political cultures of countries "avid for traces of an autochthonous and legitimating tradition" (Sommer 1993, 144) and where intellectuals felt the need to proclaim "both uniquely Latin American identities, and the respectability of original 'Latin American cultures'" (Rahier 2003, 43). *Mestiçagem* and the idealization of indigeneity ended up becoming a kind of "trope for the nation" or "the source of all Latin American possibilities yet to come" (Rahier 2003, 43). In Mexico and Peru, for example, "the indian became a prime symbol of national identity" (Wade 1997, 32; Lewis, 2000). In Bolivia, while indigenous culture was transformed into national folklore, "the principal nation-building project was to assimilate Indians into a national *mestizo* Spanish-speaking culture" (Canessa 2007, 200). Concomitantly, in Brazil the ideology of *indigenismo* legitimized a tutelary system in which the State assumed the role of 'protector' of the indigenous population. The representation of this *indigenismo*, far from promoting respect for indigenous peoples, was more "a question of exotic and romantic symbolism, based more on the glorification of the pre-Columbian indian ancestry of the nation" (Wade 1997, 32). The implication of this was the persistence of everyday discrimination in which the future of native populations continued to be "envisaged as being integrated and mestizo in colour" (Wade 1997, 32; Ramos 1998). Generally speaking, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the discourse on nation-building emphatically promoted the idea of indigenous assimilation as a kind of *sine qua non* condition for national unity (Graham 1990; Hale 1996; Stepan 1991; Stutzman 1981; Wade 1997). Debates on what the indigenous presence meant remained alive in intellectual and scientific spheres, whether through supposedly scientific understandings of the effects of miscegenation and racial determinism, advanced in various publications as Schwarcz (1993) showed, or through the mythology of indigenous figures who became sacrificial victims for the good of the nation, as in José de Alencar's fiction (Bosi 1992). On the topic of determinism, a short observation can be made. In Brazil, racial determinism seems to have first taken root in the Northeast region before later reaching the Southeast. The response to this trend also originated in the Northeast, in particular through the writings of Gilberto Freyre, who strove to emphasize the contribution of the non-white population, even proclaiming a kind of *mestiço* pride. Providing new impetus to a debate that had begun long before his work (Mota 1999; 2002), Gilberto Freyre depicted a Brazil that appeared as a mixed nation par excellence. Freyre's Brazil is the outcome of an "ethnic amalgam", a

true model of racial integration and cultural syncretism, a “racial democracy”. In this view, the patriarchal Northeast figures as the best example of Brazil as a whole. In *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933), Freyre even argues that the sugar coming from the slave-based monocrop sweetened and transformed not only the Portuguese language, but also – and more fundamentally – the hierarchical relations between black, indigenous and white people. Though contested later, this vision had, and continues to have, a great influence on generations of artists, intellectuals and opinion-makers, a viewpoint still widely present in academic and scientific research today (Graham 1990; Pena et al. 2000; Santos & Maio 2004). But while the *mestiço* nationalism of the twentieth century took Gilberto Freyre’s ‘racial democracy’ as one of its most enduring expressions (Treece 2000, 179), it was Jorge Amado, the writer of Brazil’s most widely read fictional works, who gave real impetus to the so-called ‘eulogy of miscegenation.’ The “cultural utopia” of Jorge Amado (Goldstein 2007) unfolds in narratives where everything seems to turn on the notion of ‘mixture.’ This time, the category of *caboclo* found in Alencar’s fiction gives way to the figure of the *mulato*,<sup>3</sup> the main protagonist of popular stories involving Afro-Brazilian themes. With Freyre and Jorge Amado, therefore, the Alencar-inspired project of founding a genuine ‘Brazilian soul’ (Almeida 2003; Guimarães 2004) was consolidated. The tradition surrounding *mestiço* nationalism became consolidated, therefore, permeating literature, music, art, cinema and the social sciences (to cite just some fields of human expression). Moreover, this tradition, and its allegories of racial integration, survives vividly in the national imaginary.

One echo of this ideology is the perennially fashionable idea of unifying the races, as the Bahian musician Carlinhos Brown once put it, “through the easiest way, through taste, through site, through acceptance” (Almeida 2002, 199). Brown’s words resonate with Freyre’s description of Brazil: a “complex modern community” in which the tensions surrounding race relations are resolved in a “democratic or Christian way,” that is, through close relations (Freyre 1951, 98-99). Brown follows José de Alencar and Jorge Amado in believing that *mestiçagem* functions as an index of Brazil’s singularity, as well as a possibility to be further explored in the future (or in the musician’s words: in the ‘third millennium’). Pursuing this idea further, Brown argues that there are no “whites” or “blacks” in Brazil, just “*mestiços*”, confirming the idea that, especially in the Northeast region, many Brazilians see themselves as part of a mixed meta-race (Htun 2004, 61).

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3. TN: *mulato*: someone of mixed African and European ancestry.

Certainly it does not need to be emphasized that all these ideological constructions had, and still have, a huge effect on our consciousness – as Brazilians, Cearenses or Fortalezaenses, whether indigenous or non-indigenous. This perhaps explains why in Ceará, as in the Northeast region in general, until very recently little could be affirmed about differentiated identities rooted in notions such as indigenusness, blackness or even whiteness without provoking a somewhat sceptical reaction on the part of those who see Brazil, and Ceará more particularly, as clear proof of an already consolidated process of cultural and racial mixture. In the context sketched here, if a space for explicit recognition of indigenusness was kept open, it was only through the stereotypical figure of the ‘Amazonian Indian,’ commonly represented as Brazil’s most exotic Other. As described above, in the majority of regions over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries indigenusness was objectified and made part of a legend retold in songs, commemorative occasions, folkloric rituals and especially tourist events. The affirmation of difference tends to be manifested, therefore, through the condition of the *mestiço*, amid a common understanding that ‘real’ indigenous peoples vanished a long time ago, but that we are all – as Cearenses, for example – the children of Indians and whites.

Over the last three decades, however, the growing recognition of the indigenusness of índios *misturados* (‘mixed’ indigenous peoples) has broken, albeit very mildly, with the pattern of denying indigenusness in the contemporary setting. If it is seemingly inadmissible that subjects identify themselves as really indigenous in today’s Ceará, there is recognition of a partial indigenusness located in the core of the idea of *mestiçagem*. It is through the presence of indigenous peoples perceived within this category of ‘mixed Indians’ that I shall explore the double effect of the image of Iracema, an image-symbol mobilized to both deny and recognize these identities.

### **THE INDIAN IN CONTEMPORARY CEARÁ AS AN ANTITHE- SIS OF THE IMAGE ATTRIBUTED TO IRACEMA**

During the first weeks of fieldwork for my PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media I took part in an event that served to illustrate the central role that Iracema plays in representing indigenusness in the country. The event took place in October 2005 when Ceará was chosen to host the 8<sup>th</sup> National Indigenous Games, a competition first created in 1996 during the period when the football player Pelé held the post of Extraordinary Minister of Sport. At this particular event, the National Indigenous Games united delegates

from more than 50 indigenous peoples in the country (the majority coming from Amazonia and the Xingu region) and from French Guiana, Ecuador, the United States of America, Canada and Australia. In the company of a group of young people from the Pitaguary area,<sup>4</sup> I went to the Games opening ceremony, staged on the sands of the famous Iracema Beach, which as mentioned earlier forms part of Fortaleza's tourist zone. Close to the area called the Aterro da Praia de Iracema, an enormous structure had been erected to hold hundreds of spectators, which quickly drew the attention of the passers-by walking along the beach promenade. Intrigued, many of these passers-by gradually joined the event's audience.

Also there were some of the people with whom I had studied during my undergraduate and MA courses in Social Sciences. During this period (1996-2002), when I had conducted my first research project on indigenous identification processes in Ceará, some of my colleagues questioned the attention that we, young researchers, were giving to the demands of communities that had gradually come to identify themselves as indigenous in a place where the notion of indigenusness remained highly contested, both by the general public and by local intellectuals. In the university as in other spheres, serious doubts existed over whether the Pitaguary, for example, could be considered '*índios de verdade*' ('real indigenous people'), or were simply *mestiços* – supposedly like all Cearenses, Northeasterners or Brazilians.

For years, my research companions and I had been asked to respond to the frequent doubts over the authenticity of the peoples with whom we worked, constantly faced with questions like "what are we supposed to make of this indigenous folk?" or "what's indigenous about this people"? For most, it was apparently somewhat absurd that from the 1980s people "without any linguistic or cultural distinctivity" could demand rights based on the idea of an indigenous memory and ancestry.

In recalling those first years of research, I can still evoke the sound of one of our professors' strident mocking laugh, resonating across the corridor of our department as he told us how the families of one local indigenous people had to fabricate headdresses of cardboard and green pieces of plastic in order to take part in a public presentation of a dance-ritual as they lacked 'traditional indigenous costumes'. As well as being a fairly well-known figure in his field of work, our

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4. Population inhabiting the Pitaguary Indigenous Land in the municipalities of Maracanaú and Pacatuba, neighbouring the city of Fortaleza.

professor was also a priest whose ecclesiastical career had been influenced by Liberation Theology – a movement whose spread through Brazil was closely connected to the emergence of campaigns for indigenous identification and mobilization in the country (especially in the Northeast). This was a scholar whose non-academic writings centre on issues like poverty, inequality and injustice in the Latin American context. However, for the professor, the very idea that people were now claiming the recognition of an indigenous identity in areas where until very recently ‘nobody’ had ever heard of such a thing could only be regarded as something ‘bizarre’. In calling attention to the issue of cultural authenticity, the professor commented on the fact that “these people have no specific language, religion or tradition.” I also remember that in the corridor, in the middle of the polemic, my colleagues dispersed, chuckling among themselves as they pictured the idea of a missionary inventing a ‘bunch’ of índios whose best adornment was a headdress made of cardboard and cheap plastic packaging.

On the night of the Opening of the Games, now in 2005, some of the colleagues who had previously questioned the indigeneity of populations like the Pitaguary, Tapeba, Tremembé, Jenipapo-Kanindé and others were there to see the presentation show of the ‘true Indians.’ For these colleagues, as well as the majority of my compatriots, ‘real Indians’ could only exist in other regions, far from Northeastern Brazil. The fact that some of my colleagues, who had laughed along with the story told by the priest-philosopher years before, were present at the event did not surprise me. In the company of various young Pitaguary, I sat down next to my faculty peers.

The opening ceremony included a presenter whose performance reminded several of us sat there chatting of the speakers at rodeo events. The ethnic groups were called with the same intonation used to present the competitors at a rodeo or *vaquejada*. Little by little, the presenter revealed to the public that some of the indigenous delegations had come from distant, inaccessible places, facing up to twenty days travel by canoe, boat, coach and airplane to be there, on Iracema Beach, with us, members of the audience. Dressed in clothing announced as ‘traditional,’ the participants were called on stage to speak some words in their native language, as well as perform dances, also introduced as ‘typical’ of their culture. On stage, the presenter made it seem as though we were watching a show, live and in colour: a show of exoticism.

As well as the presenter’s talk, the event also included a continuous sound track composed essentially by the song ‘Um Índio,’ by the Bahian musician Caetano Veloso, very popular in the 1970s. Speaking of ‘passion,’ ‘force’ and ‘preservation,’ in the song the

musician refers to the ‘purity’ of a messianic Indian who “will come from a colourful shining star,” “passionately like Peri,” “preserved through their physical body.” Peri, another ideal type of indigenusness in the national imaginary, is one of the main figures from the Indianist novel *O Guarani* by José de Alencar, and its many adaptations for films and TV soap operas. Just like Iracema, Peri is the personification of the qualities attributed to the ‘Indian’ in Brazil’s Indianist literary movement. While the music played repeatedly and loudly, I was struck by the irony that it was almost impossible to hear what the indigenous delegates had to say when they climbed onto the stage. In other words, I was able to hear the voice of Caetano Veloso glorifying the messianic Indian better than the speech of the indigenous people themselves as they walked up to the microphone to present themselves and say something. Simultaneously, the presenter roused the audience with comments like: “did you know that many of these Indians are seeing the ocean for the first time today, here at Iracema Beach?” “Ceará is the land of the Indian Iracema!” “It is an honour to be in the land of Iracema!”

Here it is worth recalling another excerpt from the previously cited text by Porto Alegre, in which the author underlines the following:

“Notwithstanding the harsh treatment received in reality, at the level of imagined culture, the Indian was transformed into an idealized and perfect being, owner of mythic qualities, a founding hero, the ancestral symbol of the moral virtues of a people. The paradox crystallized in the work of Alencar, especially in *Iracema*. Discussed, questioned and contested; deified or ironized, parodied and discarded, she, however, persists. How should we understand the power of this image?”

Romanticism constructed such effective notions that we are unable to rid ourselves of them. We know that the products of the imagination are not mere distortions of reality, deceits or fantasies, inoffensive or trivial. The images forged by artistic creation form part of cultural systems. They provide a mapping of the world, guidelines for action, and in this sense are powerful and effective. The symbolic universe is intimately connected to lived experience, sets down roots and leaves marks in social behaviour and individual attitudes” (Porto Alegre 2003, 311-331).

At the event, while people spoke of Iracema and Caetano Veloso’s song was playing, to the delight of an anthropologist engaged in the simultaneous act of observing and participating, I noticed the emotional reaction of a man sat close to us, who rapidly took off his glasses to dry

the tears from his eyes. There was something in this encounter, the encounter with the 'other' most distant from there, that proved all kinds of emotional reactions in the audience: curiosity, euphoria, crying, puzzlement, shock (in the face of difference, more precisely of nudity). These reactions became clearer when the ceremony reached the end and the audience was invited to come down from the stand to greet the indigenous visitors amid a burst of camera flashes and embraces.

Paradoxically, although the event was taking place in Ceará, the majority of the peoples that identify themselves as indigenous there were not on the stage. The reason for this absence was due to the criteria for taking part established by the event's organizers, as well, of course, as the perception that they themselves had of the local population. According to the conversation I had with one of the organizers immediately after the ceremony, the criteria for participating in the games included the "cultural and ethnic strength" of the participant populations. What the organizers understood as "cultural and ethnic strength" was summarized in a set of 'traditional elements,' like: "a specific language, dances, rituals, songs, traditional sports, body painting and craftwork." With these criteria in mind, the indigenous population of Ceará did not classify for participation. One of the organizers also mentioned that there had been a controversy over the 'real' existence of Indians in contemporary Ceará.

The local indigenous movement, represented by leaders from diverse communities, issued a statement repudiating the non-participation of the indigenous delegations of Ceará, contesting some of the criteria and discourses tied to them. Put otherwise, the absence of those who identified themselves as indigenous in the state not only reinforced the idea that they did not exist, it also ended up suggesting that their demands linked to an indigenous identity were ultimately 'false.' While Iracema (and Peri) were glorified during the ceremony as a model of indigeness, and Ceará was exalted as their homeland – part of a legend, a folklore, in sum, entities from the past – the people who identify themselves there as indigenous, and who have campaigned for recognition of their rights as such for at least two decades, were unable to be present on stage because, for the organizers as for the majority of the public, they did not display the authenticity of an Iracema.

This episode provided me with a valuable insight into how the authenticity of the local indigenous population is contested not only by the non-indigenous population but also by the indigenous organizations outside the Brazilian Northeast. The event was particularly revealing because it highlighted the central role that the romantic image of Iracema, as well as that of Peri, had in the definition or understanding

of what indigeneity came to be for a broader public. That evening the references to Iracema and Peri somehow made themselves more audible and thus more recognizable than the indigenous peoples as they presented themselves on the event stage, and assuredly more 'real' than all the local indigenous communities absent from the event due to the questioning concerning their authenticity.

### **IRACEMA AS A RELATIVE, AN ANCESTOR, OR THE CLEAR PROOF OF BEING INDIAN**

As I have described here, during this initial period of fieldwork, the references to a given image of Iracema as an ideal type of indigeness were clearly opposed in my perception as a novice anthropologist to the demands of the local indigenous population, the interlocutors of my research. However, as my project developed, I gradually understood that the accepted icons of indigeness – with all their romanticized dimensions, incorporated through the discursive and practical everyday representations common to the region – were also appropriated by the local indigenous population to challenge precisely the forms of questioning their identifications and the legitimacy of their demands. In an apparently contradictory relationship, the image of racial and cultural purity of the romantic persona of Iracema is employed by the indigenous subjects themselves in their own self-defence – the defence of what they are: of their memory, identity and sense of belonging, above all in contraposition to accusations that the ways in which they elaborate their identity have no historical basis, reduced to a game of political pragmatism for material gains. In this contraposition, Iracema, an ancestor, a close relative, is clear proof that “Indians do exist in Ceará, and we are here to prove it” as I was once told by an indigenous leader, a woman, someone who sees herself as simultaneously Indian and black, a daughter of ‘mixture’ and a direct descendent of José de Alencar’s fictional character.

Beyond the situations already cited here, with the development of my research activities in the field, I accompanied a group of community leaders at a rally held next to the statue of Iracema, on the beach of the same name, to celebrate the opening of the local indigenous games. It therefore made perfect sense, one of the leaders told me, to symbolically and physically demarcate the local and contemporary indigenous presence by assembling representatives of “Ceará’s ethnic groups” around one of the various monuments to Iracema, sculpture monuments that from this viewpoint attest to the fact that in the very foundation of the state is the figure of the indigenous person, thus proving that “Ceará is Indian land.”

Another episode, this time occurring at the end of my doctoral fieldwork, contributed to deepening my understanding of the polyphony that resides in the essentially romanticized image of José de Alencar's fictional character, and the multiple possibilities for mobilizing this symbol. In 2006, during the state indigenous assembly, the most important event on the annual calendar of activities of the indigenous movement in Ceará, a young Tremembé woman asked me to photograph her at the place which many of those present considered the most beautiful spot of the village hosting the event, located in an extremely arid region in the middle of the Cearense outback. As is common in this type of landscape, the most scarce and thus the most precious resource in the entire area was water – the reason why the fourteen families living there had originally migrated. What was considered the most beautiful part of the village, therefore, was called Olho d'Água, 'Eye of the Water,' the only spring throughout the extensive Nazário region. For the assembly's participants, many of whom tried to flee the intense heat, Olho D'Água quickly became a refuge during the intervals of an event typically involving four or five days of intense activities. In contrast to the dry surrounding landscape, all pastel tones, that particular part of the village had green and leafy trees, offering shade for cattle wandering in search of food and for ourselves as we went to fetch water. It was in the middle of this setting that the young Tremembé woman wanted to be photographed. She had clear skin and long, smooth, dark hair. Getting ready for the photo, she washed her face, combed her hair, and sat on a small rock close to where the water surfaced, adopting a still pose, half serious, half smiling. Looking into the camera lens, she broke the pose to ask me, a doubtful expression in her gaze: "Do I look like Iracema?" Before I could reply, she bent her head towards her right, causing her hair to fall over her shoulder and cover some of her body. Precisely at that moment confirmation of the similarity was given by one of the Tremembé women who had gathered around us, who remarked: "You do now, yes, you're looking like Iracema."

The next day I went to the same place to film<sup>5</sup> a group of women as they bathed together. Pequena, the leader or *cacique* of the Jenipapo-Kanindé, ended up performing the role of protagonist in a scene from an ethnographic video in which she, along with other elder women, are shown taking a 'gourd bath.' Standing on one of the rocks near to the slopes of Olho D'Água, Pequena poured water over her hair using a plastic container, imitating the movements involved in a 'gourd bath.' While the water flowed over her body, down to the ground and over the rocks, the *cacique* repeatedly affirmed – some-

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5. Link <https://vimeo.com/38474925>. Scene 20'20" till 20'45" - Chief Pequena speaks about the squaw Iracema bathing in the Messejana.

what to my surprise: “I am bathing just like Iracema,” “Just like the Indian woman Iracema on a rock in Messejana.” Over the course of the scene, the identification of Pequena with the image of Iracema bathing on a rock, just as described by José de Alencar in his book, and thus interpreted as an authentic indigenous custom, gradually becomes manifest.

At this moment, rather than trying to deconstruct what for many of us researchers comprises a stereotyped image of indigeneity, Pequena, as she poured the water over her smooth, dark hair, while evoking the image of Iracema’s bath in Messejana, played creatively with popular references that have become crystallized, in ubiquitous form, in the Cearense imagination. There, as the women bathed at Olho D’Água, Iracema materialized as a relative, a friend, a sister. Iracema emerged as the incontestable indigenous ancestor, embodied by pronouncing her name and by a simple gesture of raising the gourd to pour water over one’s face and hair.

**figure 5 and 6**

Iracema - Muse of Ceará is a monument located at the lake of Messejana.

The statue was made after a beauty contest that counted with the participation of 2,760 candidates. Created by the artist Alexandre Rodrigues, the statue is based on the physical characteristics of the contest winner.



**figure 7 and 8**

Chief Pequena, the leader of the Jenipapo-Kanindé people, takes a bath while saying she is doing it exactly as the statue of Iracema near the lake of Messejana. The images were extracted from the ethnographic film I made for my PhD called Gathering Strength.



## CONCLUSION

“The political-ideological meaning of Brazilian romantic Indianism has already been abundantly identified and critiqued. The ‘myth’ of Iracema and its implications for the image of the Indian in Brazilian culture show the survival power of ideas through time, beyond the fiction created by the writer’s pen. If the stereotypes fashioned in relation to the Indians remain alive and active within society, it is because the notion of a world that dies to enable the emergence of a new civilization was not a mere imposition of the context at that moment. It is a powerful image that remains alive still today. Its effects on the relations between Indians and non-Indians make themselves felt, although they cannot be clearly evaluated since we are on the slippery and treacherous terrain of ideologies, half-formed notions and stereotypes” (Porto Alegre 2003, 311-331).

Accepted icons of indigenusness (and frequently their romanticized dimension) are deployed by the local population in support of their demands. As I remarked earlier, in diverse situations during my fieldwork, indigenous leaders representing various peoples living today in the state of Ceará gathered around one of the statues of Iracema, in the city of Fortaleza, to celebrate the opening of an event, or to demonstrate over some issue concerning their rights. For some people, then, rather than feeding the idea that the local indigenous population is incapable of displaying signs of ‘cultural distinction,’ Iracema provides clear proof that Ceará is ‘Indian land.’ In this sense, the iconic image of Iracema (along with Peri and other characters from the Indianist literature is used both by non-indigenous people to question the authenticity and deauthorize the discourse of those who identify themselves today as indigenous, and by the latter themselves in their references to who they are and what indigenusness may signify for themselves. The identification with notions of indigenusness presented in José de Alencar’s narrative and the many references to the figure of Iracema are just one example of the multiple ways through which the local population identifies, affirms and represents its indigenusness. Pressurized on an everyday basis to demonstrate the legitimacy of their demands, community leaders emphasize a cultural distinction that is manifested both through their discursive representations and through their quotidian practices. Symbols like Iracema are thus claimed and articulated with origin narratives, at the same time as they are included in public shows of indigenusness through all kinds of

performances. However, in the process of defining their identities as indigenous people, these leaders – most of them women – may also identify with images of blackness, revealing an awareness of being part of a ‘racially and culturally mixed’ people.

In one form or another, there is a recognition that *mestiçagem* is a reality present in the life of the indigenous population of contemporary Ceará. This fact is surprising when we consider that, both in common opinion and in the specialized literature on the subject, an understanding exists that demanding recognition of indigeneity and displaying an awareness of one’s own *mestiçagem* are perceived to be incompatible. This derives from the fact that *mestiçagem* is recurrently seen as an ‘evolutionary’ process through which indigenous peoples are transformed into undifferentiated categories, like *caboclos*, *mestiços* or *sertanejos* (see Lowie 1946, Métraux 1946, Ribeiro 1970, Galvão 1979). In contrast to this premise, the situations that I experienced during my fieldwork showed that local populations, like the Pitaguary, Tapeba, Tremembé, Jenipapo-Kanindé, Kanindé, Kalabaça, Potyguara, Anacé and others, have engaged in processes of identification and construction of cultural and ethnic boundaries at the same time as they turn to what they discern as their indigenous, black and *mestiço* roots, indicating a sense of being primarily indigenous, but also black and/or *mestiços*.

The fact that the indigenous leaders with whom I worked also refer to themselves as *caboclos*, *negros*, *misturados*, but above all as *indígenas* shows that, despite the labels attributed by the elites and wider society, their identities remain far from containing a single or static meaning. In making this point, I take from La Cadena (2000) the idea that *mestizaje* or *mestiçagem*, as a place of struggle, is marked by ‘flexibility’ and thus contains space for movement. Here too we can make use of French’s argument (2004) that *mestiçagem*, along with the awareness of being *mestiço*, involves an openness and ‘fluidity,’ such that people can simultaneously affirm their indigeneity and blackness, or their mixed indigeness. The Pitaguary, Tapeba, Tremembé, Jenipapo-Kanindé and other peoples cited here have taken part in what various authors have called a movement of ‘re-Indianization’ (Warren 2001; French 2004), which has empowered these peoples to shift from the condition of *caboclo* to *caboclo-indígena* or *índio-misturado*, ‘mixed Indian’ (Sampaio 1986; Baptista 1992; Grünwald 1994; Oliveira Filho 1994; 1999). In other words, these populations have successfully distanced themselves from undifferentiated categories, conceived on the basis of notions like cultural and ethnic homogeneity, in order to affirm themselves as

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indigenous, owners of specific rights, without though ceasing to reproduce the 'territoriality' and 'memory' of their *caboclo*, *mestiço* or *sertanejo* identities (French 2004, 664). In assimilating this argument, here I also agree with Peter Wade's assertion that this possibility of ascension and inclusion, represented by the mobility described above, does not make those who move from one category to another safe from discrimination, since *mestiçagem*, for all intents and purposes, is still located within a context of "hierarchies of power and value" (2005).



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