

## THE FOREST AND THE CAMP. PIERRE CLASTRES' ETHNOLOGY IN LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF HÉLÈNE CLASTRES

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores Hélène Clastres' contribution to ethnology, often overshadowed by that of her husband, Pierre Clastres, showing the influence of their respective works on political anthropology and the understanding of Amerindian societies. Hélène Clastres played an active part in field missions and made a significant contribution to ethnological research, particularly in the fields of prophetism, funerary rituals, mythology and language. Among her many interests, she delved into Amerindian conceptions of religion, the sacred without gods, and Tupí-Guaraní prophetism, emphasizing the endogeneity of these spiritual phenomena. Unlike Pierre, who focused on politics and war, she paid particular attention to funerary rites and the historical dynamics that run through societies. The article highlights their complementary approach, in which Hélène Clastres shed light on aspects that are often invisible in Pierre's work, such as the role of women and the relationship between war and ritual. Through a detailed analysis of myths and funerary practices, she enriched the anthropology of religion and questioned the conceptualization of power and memory in stateless societies. Jointly, their work shaped an original perspective on political anthropology and the hypotheses surrounding the emergence of centralized power.

**Keywords:** Native American Ethnology, Tupí-Guaraní Prophetism, Anthropology of Religion, Pierre Clastres, Hélène Clastres, Stateless Societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

When reading the work of Pierre Clastres, it is difficult to discern the influence of Hélène Clastres on his thought and to appreciate her significance in the field. Although it is known that he was not alone during his first field mission in 1963, commissioned by the Musée de l'Homme and named the Mission Clastres-Sebag,<sup>1</sup> readers find few hints of Hélène Clastres' presence – she appears only once under her name adapted into the Guayaki language: Erenagi (P. Clastres 1972: 350). Pierre Clastres' first thesis advisor, Alfred Métraux, had emphasized to Hélène the value of joint ethnological work and in February 1963 had encouraged her to join the mission (Delorme and Launay, forthcoming). Unlike her two male colleagues, she financed her own trip, selling her 2CV to do so (Devevey 2023). Hélène Clastres joined Pierre Clastres and Lucien Sebag in Paraguay, already having a basic understanding of the Guayaki language through Léon Cadogan's recordings. After spending a month at Arroyo Morotí, the mission proceeded to the Paraguayan Chaco, working with other amerindian groups. This initial fieldwork, completed in October 1963, marked Hélène Clastres' discreet entry into the ethnological world.

While working through the Pierre Clastres archive, curated by Hélène Clastres and housed at the Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), we found that Pierre's field notes intertwined significantly with Hélène's, showing that her role in the field was far from marginal. During the 2017 annual colloquium of the Anamnèse association, devoted to the works of Pierre Clastres, Hélène recalled the names of Aché individuals in photographs, notably children, who served as key informants. One archive folder even contains drawings she had Guayaki children make to help identify an object referenced in a myth, the name of which was entirely unfamiliar to her.

Subsequently, Hélène's career reflected the shifting dynamics within the discipline throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She contributed to the institutionalization of ethnology in academia, becoming Éric de Dampierre's assistant at Nanterre in 1967. Many of her Sorbonne peers accompanied her on this path: Jeanne Favret-Saada, Alfred Adler, Michel Izard, among others. In 1972, she defended her dissertation on Tupí-Guaraní prophetism, under the supervision of Roger Bastide, adopting an ethno-historical approach

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hélène Clastres in an interview we conducted with her and Alfred Adler, Claude Lévi-Strauss had insisted that Lucien Sebag be part of the mission (DELORME and LAUNAY, forthcoming); moreover, they only co-authored one article: P. CLASTRES and SEBAG 2005 [1963].

that examined the phenomenon's endogenous nature. She published it three years later under its original title, *La Terre sans mal* (H. Clastres 1975). She then expanded her focus to the history of ideas, and in the 1990s switched to French ethnology with the Mission du Patrimoine CNRS. Alongside Solange Pinton, who also began her career in Americanist ethnology, she participated in a turn towards endotic ethnology. Together, they conducted studies on customary writings regarding birth, marriage, and death rituals in Normandy region (H. Clastres, Jolas and Pinton 1991; H. Clastres and Pinton 1996, 1997) and the oral histories of Creuse masons (H. Clastres and Pinton 1999, 2001). Although she considered her Americanist work complete and had largely moved on, she continued to publish articles from her earlier fieldwork, albeit in limited circulation and thus still largely unknown.<sup>2</sup>

The announcement of Hélène's passing on June 30, 2023 received limited attention in France, with a brief obituary in *Le Monde* on July 11 and two academic articles revisiting her work (Jabin and Ruiz Zubizarreta 2024; Delorme and Launay 2023). This paper will illustrate how Pierre Clastres' oeuvre was unmistakably shaped by Hélène Clastres' substantial contributions, offering new insights into the reading of *La Société contre l'État* (P. Clastres 1974a). With themes such as cannibalism, death, war, and prophetism, Hélène's work can be viewed as a masterful contribution to the anthropology of death and religion, providing a novel and complementary perspective to Pierre Clastres' research.

## 1. AN ANTHROPOLOGY IN TWO VOICES

The Clastres' initiation into fieldwork was clouded by the loss of a mentor. In April 1963, after Pierre Clastres had been among the Aché Gatu in Paraguay for less than two months, Alfred Métraux, his doctoral advisor, took his own life. Correspondence between Pierre Clastres and Claude Lévi-Strauss shows the latter stepping in to oversee the young researcher's dissertation. Meanwhile, Hélène Clastres chose Roger Bastide as her own advisor, a mentor Pierre would later also select for his never-defended doctoral dissertation. While these three figures<sup>3</sup> were not the only

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see the article "How Myths Live: Reflections on Guaraní Mythology" published in the journal *Amerindia* (H. CLASTRES 1990a) or "A Model of Territorial Inscription: The Forest Indians of South America", included in the volume *Tracés de fondation* edited by Marcel Détienne (H. CLASTRES 1990b).

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Clastres notably emphasized the importance of François Châtelet and professors from the Sorbonne, as well as figures such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for example (DELORME and LAUNAY, forthcoming).

influences on the Clastres, their work is deeply marked by these intellectual giants.

### 1.1. *Cannibals without faith, law, or king: Explorers' and missionaries' accounts*

We know how important the accounts of explorers and missionaries such as André Thevet, Jean de Léry, Yves d'Evreux, Ruiz de Montoya and Pedro Lozano were to the work of Pierre Clastres, who went so far as to write his own *Chronique* (P. Clastres 1972) in the style favored by these travelers. As Claude Lévi-Strauss recalled in his memorial essay, this was a method that Alfred Métraux applied to every work:

[...] First of all, surround yourself with all the critical apparatus, with all the mass of information available, analyze it, scrutinize it, discuss it, classify it, exploit it; then bring all this to life through experience in the field and never give in to the indulgences of the imagination, which is too prone to fanciful reconstructions...<sup>4</sup> (Lévi-Strauss *et al.* 1964).

This ethno-historical method is even more evident in the work of Hélène Clastres. She devoted part of her work to the history of ideas, describing the imaginary world of Western explorers as it related to the Savages. She wrote the preface to the reprint of Yves d'Evreux's *Voyage au Nord du Brésil* (1985 [1615]). Although it was François Châtelet who suggested that Hélène should devote herself to the history of ideas, it is clear that this assiduous and heuristic reading of travel accounts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries shows the influence of Alfred Métraux, who strongly encouraged his students to read the earliest chroniclers.

In an article entitled “La religion sans les dieux. Les chroniqueurs du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle devant les Sauvages de l'Amérique du Sud” (H. Clastres 1986), which will be the focus of our discussion below, she gives a truly critical reading of these chronicles. Her approach is not so much to take them as an ethnographic source as to reveal, through their accounts, the dominant Western representations of religion that hinder the chroniclers' ability to perceive the religious among the Guaraní. A second text is worth mentioning, soberly entitled “Sauvages et civilisés au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, this time devoted to the Enlightenment, which saw a revival of interest in the Savages of the New World.

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<sup>4</sup> Our translation; original quote: “[...] D'abord, s'entourer de tout l'appareil critique, de toute la masse d'informations disponibles, l'analyser, la dépouiller, la discuter, la classer, l'exploiter; ensuite vivifier tout cela par l'expérience du terrain et ne jamais céder aux complaisances de l'imagination, trop encline aux reconstructions fantaisistes...”.

According to H  l  ne Clastres, M  traux was also a “model” for Pierre Clastres, because he was a fieldworker (Jabin and Zubizarreta 2024), in contrast to the armchair anthropologists. For the generation of young philosophers who were to participate in the institutionalization of ethnology in universities, experienced ethnographers such as M  traux were references for learning the discipline and the profession.

### 1.2. *From M  traux to Roger Bastide: The last humans and the Land without Evil*

In 1928, M  traux published his dissertation on the religion of the Tupinamba (M  traux 1928). In it, he proposed to study Tupinamba anthropophagy, but also the myths that testified to their belief in the existence of a Land without Evil. In his study of the migrations of the Tup  -Guaran  , published a year earlier, he had already referred to this search for an otherworld of abundance, where suffering, ordinary rules and work no longer existed, and made it the determining cause of these migrations (M  traux 1927). H  l  ne Clastres traces her interest in Guaran   texts back to M  traux and his mention of L  on Cadogan’s publication of *Ayvu Rapyta* (1959). This is where H  l  ne Clastres’ central work on the Tup   and Guaran   originated (Jabin and Ruiz Zubizarreta 2024).

*La Terre sans Mal* (1975) is H  l  ne Clastres’ only book. It is based on her 1972 dissertation, supervised by Roger Bastide, and was published a year after *La Soci  t   contre l’  tat* (P. Clastres 1974a). Unlike the dissertation, which was subtitled “Essai sur le messianisme tupi-guarani”, the book is now subtitled “Le proph  tisme tupi-guarani”. This change runs counter to Alfred M  traux’s analyses. H  l  ne Clastres confided that this decision stemmed from discussions with Pierre, who argued in favor of using the term prophetism rather than messianism, since the latter seemed to describe religious mechanisms linked to exogenous factors, in particular the colonial situation (Jabin and Ruiz Zubizarreta 2024).<sup>5</sup> In his last lecture, on Tup  -Guaran   prophetism, Pierre Clastres stated:

Tup  -Guaran   prophetism is not messianism, as it owes absolutely nothing to contact with Europeans: this movement is purely indigenous, and had begun to develop long before their arrival, probably as early as the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As chance would have it, the first Europeans witnessed the near-culmination of this movement, and their arrival changed everything.

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<sup>5</sup> One of the key reference works of the time is Wilhelm M  hlmann’s *Chiliasmus und Nativismus*, whose French translation, *Messianismes r  volutionnaires du Tiers-Monde*, appeared in 1968.

We therefore find ourselves confronted with a strictly indigenous socio-religious phenomenon that developed purely internally: in short, with a wild prophetism, a case that is probably unique in the known history of ethnology.<sup>6</sup>

The seeds of this thinking can also be traced to H  l  ne Clastres' dissertation supervisor, Roger Bastide.<sup>7</sup> H  l  ne had attended Bastide's classes and preferred him to L  vi-Strauss because of his interest in religion. Her choice also reflected a desire not to have the same supervisor as her husband (Delorme and Launay, forthcoming).

Roger Bastide was not only the teacher of H  l  ne Clastres, for it was Bastide whom Pierre Clastres chose to supervise his state dissertation on Tup  -Guaran   prophetism. It should be pointed out that Pierre Clastres originally used the term prophet for a reason other than to dissociate himself from messianism. In fact, as early as 1969, Pierre Clastres opted for the term prophet to designate the *karai  * and *pa'i*, because he felt that the term shaman was unsuitable, as it "is inadequate to describe the true personality of these men capable of verbal ecstasy when moved by the spirit of the gods" (P. Clastres 1974c [1969]: 140). It was not until 1974, with the writing of the chapter "La Soci  t   contre l'  tat", that Tup  -Guaran   prophetism was integrated into his political anthropology and understood as an endogenous movement rejecting the coercive power forming among the *mburuvicha*, the great Tup  -Guaran   chiefs (P. Clastres 1974a). It is undoubtedly to Bastide, therefore, that Pierre Clastres originally owes his reflection on the endogenous nature of the phenomenon, which led him to abandon the definition of messianism.

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasized by Pierre Clastres: Imec, "Pierre Clastres" Archive Collection, File 460 CLS 12.3. Our translation; original quote: "Le proph  tisme tupi-guarani n'est pas un messianisme, car il ne doit strictement rien au contact avec les Europ  ens: ce mouvement est purement autochtone, il avait commenc      se d  velopper bien avant leur arriv  e, sans doute d  s le milieu du XV   si  cle. Le hasard fit que les premiers Europ  ens observ  rent le point quasi culminant de ce mouvement, dont leur arriv  e bouleversa toutes les donn  es. On se trouve donc confront      un ph  nom  ne socio-religieux strictement indig  ne, qui s'est d  velopp   de mani  re purement interne: bref, devant un proph  tisme sauvage, cas sans doute unique dans l'histoire connue de l'ethnologie".

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, "Messianism and Social and Economic Development" from 1961, in which Roger Bastide writes: "Is it true, as some maintain, that messianism does not occur among peoples who live by hunting and gathering and is found only in conjunction with the appearance of agriculture? An inquiry into this question would lead us too far afield. It would entail a discussion of specific cases, such as that of the Guaran  s whose messianism antedates the colonial era and is therefore beyond the scope of our subject as we have just defined it" (BASTIDE 1961).

1.3. “Ñe’e porä, les belles paroles”. *The importance of language and myths: The influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss*

We are all familiar with Hélène’s dissertation work (1972b, 1975) and the importance she attaches to myth. Some of her work, both Americanist and French, is devoted to mythology and oral history. This strong emphasis on the study of myth, in both Pierre and Hélène, is undeniably linked to the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, following his cardinal teaching that “such narratives are precisely very serious” and that “myths do not speak for nothing” (P. Clastres 1974d: 66). Indeed, *Le Grand Parler* (P. Clastres 1974d) can be seen as a typical exercise in structuralist anthropology.

What’s more, it was language that probably captivated the Clastres couple the most: from the study of matins in the forest, to the nocturnal singing of the hunters, from the gift of words, to which the chief is bound, to the silence of the scarred initiates. Indeed, language is inseparable from Clastres’ political anthropology, which never ceases to place the spoken word in the space of power. It is partly because the prophets and chiefs speak – and through them the ancestors or gods – or remain silent that they interest the Clastres. On the one hand, the empty word of the chief who cannot express his own desire; on the other, the word of the prophet who drags entire villages with him and advocates the abandonment of rules. Perhaps this fascination with language is part of the explanation for the fantasized purity of the Guaraní language in Pierre’s texts, which led him to erase the borrowings of the Guaraní from the Spanish language in his translations (Ruiz Zubizarreta, forthcoming).

It is usual to point out the areas of disagreement between Pierre Clastres and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but much less attention is paid to showing how much the Clastres couple borrow from him. Although Pierre Clastres’ political anthropology goes so far as to conclude that “structuralism is like theology without God: it is sociology without society” (P. Clastres 1980: 160), he never ceases to refer to, comment on and criticize Lévi-Strauss’s work.<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss’s positive presence is most evident in his early writings.

Pierre Clastres also follows in the wake of the representations of ethnology and the ethnologist given by Lévi-Strauss and Métraux. The romantic tone of *Chronique des Indiens guayaki* is certainly marked by Métraux’s words that “to be able to study a primitive society, it must already be starting to disintegrate” (P. Clastres 1972: 76), but it also finds in

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<sup>8</sup> See notably *Archaeology of Violence* (P. CLASTRES 1977).



*Tristes tropiques*, which accompanied Pierre Clastres' training, a model of the genre.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Hélène Clastres' work focuses on at least six central themes: language, mythology, religion, prophetism, cannibalism and death. While certain themes overlap with Pierre Clastres' fields of inquiry, it should be noted that the way they are approached is not identical, and that, like the work on prophetism, the Clastres' work can be seen as a research pairing, each exploring different hypotheses with their own specific perspective.

### 2.1. *Women, feast and war*

Pierre Clastres' writings on war are well known, particularly his article "Archéologie de la violence: la guerre dans les sociétés primitives"<sup>10</sup> (P. Clastres 1977). His aim was to respond to the absence of an ethnological discourse on war, and even the denial of its sociological nature. From the outset, Pierre Clastres situates war in the service of politics. War ensures the dispersal of a multiplicity of autonomous communities, where equality reigns between their members because of the absence of a central authority. War thus guarantees the absence of fusion between groups. The major contribution of this text was undoubtedly to give violence and war a place in anthropological analysis, giving them an institutional and structural dimension.

Hélène Clastres' article "Les beaux-frères ennemis. À propos du cannibalisme tupinamba" was originally published in the sixth issue of *La Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*<sup>11</sup> (H. Clastres 1972a). It focuses on the fate

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<sup>9</sup> Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc highlights this proximity between Lévi-Strauss and Pierre Clastres in what he describes as a "powerful melancholic affect that permeates the discourse of an anthropologist watching those he speaks of – and whose voices he seeks to amplify – die and vanish before his eyes" (SIBERTIN-BLANC 2020: 18).

<sup>10</sup> Often presented as a book, it is in fact a long article that initially appeared in the first issue of the journal *Libre* in 1977. It was republished in 1980 in the posthumous volume *Recherches d'anthropologie politique* and reissued in 1997 as a standalone work by Éditions de l'Aube in the "Mondes en cours" collection by Jean Viard.

<sup>11</sup> This issue, titled "Destins du cannibalisme", was entirely dedicated to the subject of anthropophagy, its connection to incest, and kinship relations. In the preface to the issue, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, the journal's founder, wrote that the idea of devoting an issue to cannibalism emerged from a discussion between an ethnologist and a psychoanalyst. Each was grappling with their own disciplinary challenges. In ethnology, there was a recognized lack of a general theory of cannibalism. This absence was partly explained by the diversity of functions that cannibalism fulfills according to the groups studied. The most common explanation – that of



of prisoners of war who are given a wife by the victorious tribe. These prisoners would be sacrificed and eaten months or even years later in a ceremony. She argues that this marriage of prisoners of war and their consumption maintains a cycle of revenge between Tupinamba groups: a cycle that encourages the defeated group to avenge their companions who have become prisoners and brothers-in-law of the victorious group. Revenge is exacted by waging war in order to take prisoners who will in turn be consumed in an anthropophagous feast. In this way, Hélène Clastres sketches out the political function of sacrifice and the prestige that the sacrificer derives from it. Above all, she outlines the contours of an anthropology that considers not just the exchange of women, but also the exchange of men. She also looks at the role of women in receiving prisoners, preparing them for death, maintaining the cycle of vengeance, and the different fates of men and women prisoners.

Hélène and Pierre Clastres seem moved by the same desire to describe the violence that is expressed in the cultures in which they have taken an interest, without euphemizing or toning down the facts in a way that would be more conducive to romanticizing these peoples' culture. Violence and war are seen as the expression of politics, as the rejection of the division between masters and slaves in a community of peers. However, their views differ somewhat, particularly on the place of women. While Pierre Clastres does not deny the sexual division of labor, he plays it down to a large extent, and in particular ignores the role of women in war. He makes no mention of their active contribution, replacing them with the logic of exchange, as goods to be exchanged or captured.

Lastly, it seems that the invisibilization of women's role also explains another limitation of Pierre Clastres' thinking: the failure to take into account the relationship between war and celebration, despite the fact that it has been touched on several times.<sup>12</sup> As a result, he completely ignores the active role played by women in the rites surrounding war, which H  l  ne Clastres takes the time to document. In this respect, Pierre

incorporation, i.e., eating the other as a means of appropriating their power and assets, as a form of union – was ultimately ineffective in ethnology. In psychoanalysis, the confrontation with real cannibalism posed a challenge: if the fantasy of incorporation is universal and sublimated into an imaginary form of cannibalism, how then can we make sense of the existence of actual cannibalism?

<sup>12</sup> From his fieldwork with the Chulupi, Pierre Clastres brought back several war narratives, which were recorded on magnetic tape and are preserved in the Imec archive collection. In these war stories, festivity is almost omnipresent. The first Chulupi account, that of the capture and death of Kalali'in, a Toba chief, is almost more a story of celebration than of a martial exploit. Moreover, women play a role in these narratives that closely resembles the descriptions of the Tupinamba provided by H  l  ne Clastres.

Clastres' archaeology of violence and anthropology of the phenomenon of war would have benefited from being supplemented by Hélène Clastres' original analyses.

## 2.2. *Gods and the State. Clastres' anarchist anthropology in the face of sacred power*

Pierre and Hélène Clastres are perhaps most clearly distinguishable when they focus on the same subjects. Each, for instance, gives a different interpretation of Tupí-Guaraní prophetism. We know how much the thesis of society versus the State resonated in libertarian thinking and inspired the construction of an anarchist anthropology. James C. Scott acknowledged his own work's debt to Pierre Clastres (Scott 2009: xiii), installing him among the initiators of anarchist anthropology; David Graeber, who was close to Clastres' friend and colleague Marshall Sahlins, describes Pierre Clastres as "one (of the few) overtly anarchist anthropologists" (Graeber 2004: 22) and comments on his work in numerous publications that now constitute a benchmark in anarchist anthropology. Yet the anarchist tradition, by "anthropologizing" itself, seems to have forgotten that in its own thinking, there is another figure of exteriority capable of impeding freedom and leading to oppression: religion.<sup>13</sup> Yet no one seems to have been interested in Hélène's anthropology of religion and her conclusions on prophetism as the negativity of society, as a centrifugal force.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Hélène was the first of the couple to offer an interpretation of Tupí-Guaraní prophetism. In her work, migrations were seen as essentially religious events, or at least as having religious rather than economic or political motivations (Sibertin-Blanc 2020: 196). She notes very clearly the context of sociopolitical change that affected the Tupí-Guaraní in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, she reaffirms the need to view prophetism as something other than a religious movement seeking to restore overall cohesion in the face of disruption, as messianisms do. In fact, the theme of a land without evil is not new, as Hélène points out after Métraux. To reach the land without evil, the prophets' discourse advocates that all social norms be abandoned, with the idea that this quest unfolds in mythical time itself, "as if it were a question of going 'even faster' than the myth, to take mythical time by

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<sup>13</sup> This brings to mind the seminal work of anarchist literature, *God and the State* by Mikhail BAKUNIN (1882).

<sup>14</sup> In the field of philosophy, the work of Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc and Christian FERRIÉ (2017) is noteworthy, as they have carried out cross-readings of *La Terre sans mal* and Pierre Clastres' last lecture. A reconstruction of his last lectures is due to be published shortly. It is mainly in Brazilian anthropology that we find researchers who have genuinely crossed writings (SZTUTMAN 2011, 2019; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 2019).

storm” (Sibertin-Blanc 2020: 197). For Hélène, this prophetic discourse, a veritable call to insurgent behaviour, is the expression of a centrifugal logic specific to these societies. By contrast, Pierre saw a fundamental ambiguity in this politico-religious “therapy” of prophetism: the ability of these god-men to take whole villages with them, their exteriority that makes them exist as friends in a territory that is not their own.

He is outside war, and everywhere in contradiction with the essential property of primitive society. [...] The prophet is the man who abolishes the effectiveness of war [...] He does not annul the antagonism between enemy groups: he brings mortal enemies together within the same unity, for which he is the keystone.<sup>15</sup>

In the language of his friends Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the prophet could almost be said to “suspend the use of weapons [...] he *encasts* the war machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 529).

Much less well known than *La Terre sans mal* (1975), Hélène’s text on “La religion sans les dieux” (1986) provides essential keys for Clastrian political anthropology. By studying Guaraní piety, Hélène proposes a new reading of the sacred and the religious. How can we envisage a religion in the absence of gods? The gods are distinguished by their silence, dictating no theology. The Guaraní wise men seek the words of their gods in song and dance. It is therefore appropriate to define the religious from below (Tarot 2008), as the religious counterpart to the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres. Here, there is no coercion from the gods telling us how to pray to them, what sacrifices to make, what litany to chant. This is probably where the words of the *karai* came to Clastres’ attention, because they know the way to the land without evil. In *La Société contre l’État*, we find a reflection on social change and the concepts of infrastructure and superstructure: “And if one wants to preserve the Marxist concepts of infrastructure and superstructure, then perhaps one must acknowledge that the infrastructure is the political, and the superstructure is the economic” (P. Clastres 1974a: 110). In one of his lectures on Amerindian religions, he wrote: “To sum up, it is mythic discourse, as the foundation of society and the source of the norms on which its continuance depends, that constitutes the infrastructure of this type of society”.<sup>16</sup> It is by introducing a change in mythical discourse that we change society.

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<sup>15</sup> IMEC, “Pierre Clastres” Archive Collection, File CLS 460 12.2. Our translation; original quote: “Il est au dehors de la guerre, et partout en contradiction avec la propriété essentielle de la société primitive. [...] le prophète est l’homme qui abolit l’efficacité de la guerre [...] Il n’annule pas l’antagonisme entre groupes ennemis: il réunit au sein d’une même unité dont il constitue la clé de voûte des ennemis mortels”.

<sup>16</sup> Emphasized by Pierre Clastres: IMEC, “Pierre Clastres” Archive Collection, File CLS 460 12.7.

While Pierre was very interested in the religious discourse in his fields, it was the political function that attracted the most attention. Delving into the work of Hélène Clastres restores to the anthropology of the couple a dimension that has been lost and that few have retained in anthropology. It thus seems to us that Hélène's work can provide anarchist anthropology with new material for thinking about the interweaving of power and the sacred.

### 3. WORDS, DEATH AND CORPSES. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF HÉLÈNE CLASTRES

Hélène's work covers a profusion of different fields: from Paraguay to Domfrontais, from Guayaki funerary rites to the oral histories of the Creusois masons. However, all these areas share common interests: orality and language, the rites surrounding death and the bodies of the deceased. While we have so far shown that Hélène's work sheds new light on Pierre Clastres' efforts, not only because she helped sketch out the main lines of his work but also because she added to it, we now need to show how much more widely her work contributes to anthropology, particularly in terms of religion and the funerary, memory and the history of thought.

#### 3.1. *Constructing an anthropology of the religious and the funerary*

Hélène Clastres' work is still little known, and mainly takes the form of articles. And yet, a common thread runs through her career, bringing an original contribution to the anthropology of death, ritual and religion.<sup>17</sup>

We have already mentioned her paper "Les beaux-frères ennemis. À propos du cannibalisme Tupinamba", which explores the cannibalistic practices of the Tupinambas who inhabited the Brazilian coast in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (H. Clastres 1972a). In it, she extends Montaigne's idea that, rather than eating their dead directly, the Tupinambas ate members from outside their group. In short, it is a kind of diverted endocannibalism, since they eat those who have previously eaten their relatives. The paper concludes with an introduction to endocannibalism proper, this time practised several centuries apart by a Guayaki group, and which Pierre Clastres made the main plot of his *Chronique* (P. Clastres 1972). This was also the subject of an earlier article by Hélène Clastres: "Rites funéraires Guayaki", published in issue 57 of the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* (H. Clastres 1968).

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<sup>17</sup> In this connection, see the reissue of five of these papers under the title *Les morts en partage* (H. CLASTRES 2023).

In this text, she looks at two distinct funerary rituals among two Guayaki groups: one practises endocannibalism and the other buries its dead. The former group, as well as appreciating human flesh, consider that without the ingestion of the dead body, the *Ianve* (persecuting spirit) of the dead would attempt to penetrate a nearby living body, causing its death. Treating the corpse as food forces the dead to recognize that they have become insubstantial and no longer have anything to do here on earth.

Later in her career, she and Solange Pinton co-wrote “La tournée des voisins. L’annonce du décès en Basse-Normandie”, a chapter from the multi-author volume *Par Écrit. Ethnologie des écritures quotidiennes*, edited by Daniel Fabre (H. Clastres and Pinton 1997). This text relates the fieldwork carried out by Hélène and Pinton in the Domfrontais region of rural France, where it was customary to announce deaths door-to-door. They analyze the complex issues involved in the transition from an oral to a written language for the bearers of death notices, replacing or supplementing their rounds in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As we noted above, Hélène Clastres is always attentive to the question of gendered division in funeral rituals: from the specifically female mockery that greets the enemy of war among the Tupinambas, to the distribution of fliers announcing death, which is organized differently according to the bearer’s gender in the Domfrontais country, via the role of women in maintaining cycles of vengeance and the gendered distribution of the pieces of flesh consumed among the Guayaki. This approach is all the more fundamental in that the gestures of opening and closing the world of the living at birth and death merit re-analysis in the light of male and female interventions in ritual. From the Amazon rainforest to the Normandy bocage, these contrasting texts reveal some of the salient features that mark every human culture’s relationship with death.

Death is grasped by the dead. While death is often approached in its abstraction and through the belief systems associated with it, Hélène Clastres reminds us that death becomes tangible through the effects of separation and relational ruptures that death induces between people. A society always inherits the death of its members and their corpses. And it is in the aftermath of death that the survivors learn what little they think they know about death.

The dead are our enemies. Far from our own fantasies of “rediscovering” supposedly natural relationships with our dying and our dead, the rituals described here act out the fact that the dead, previously friends, allies and relatives, have become enemies of the group. By opening a breach between the world of the living and that of the dead, each new death shakes the balance of society. It is precisely because the dead body no longer speaks, because its subjectivity has fled, that it belongs to the group. Tensions are

revealed and the dividing lines between friends and enemies are redrawn. By becoming outside the group, the dead reaffirm the “we” that makes up the group.

The dead contaminate the living. And the more the living have maintained an intimate relationship with the dead, the more they are threatened by death’s ontological transformation. Because of their previous closeness, they are the most likely to be drawn away from the world of the living by the dead. Direct contact with the dead is thus mediated by third parties who ensure the smooth running of rituals whose primary function is to remove the dead from the everyday world of the living.

No death is natural. Death is always provoked and calls for vengeance. From then on, the dead take on a paradoxical dual role: enemy (they are excluded) and ally (they are avenged). Death cries out for death. At a time when our societies are legislating and debating the right to assisted dying, these practices remind us of the extent to which death is permeated by the question of power. It is always a question of where responsibility for the evil lies – with the disease, the poison, or the hand that poured it? Which transforms the misfortune of death into deliverance, which has killed?<sup>18</sup> Hélène’s texts remind us of the taboo on murder and the exceptional status of the murderer, who literally becomes outside himself, Other.

Mortuary and funerary rites reflect the social structure of the living. Cannibalism and the cycle of revenge are highly sophisticated practices that reflect the social structures of generation, gender, kinship and status. For example, *jepy* (revenge) among the Guayaki is not the same for everyone. Old people and children are only entitled to a simulated *jepy*; if the dead person is a hunter, a child will be sacrificed for him, almost always one of his own daughters. Everywhere, the treatment of the dead reflects the internal hierarchies of the groups.

Lastly, as we have said, Hélène Clastres always combined her dynamic conception of cultures with an epistemological reflection on the status of sources and the conditions of observation, from the first European travelers to contemporary ethnologists. Throughout her work, Hélène Clastres never ceased to invite us to reframe the “Them/Us” dichotomy, the foundation of all anthropology. On discovering the cannibalistic practices of certain Amerindian peoples, European travelers and colonizers turned these peoples into typical figures of radical otherness, hungry warriors, savages capable of reducing their fellow human beings to game. Tracing

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<sup>18</sup> This is what Camille Tarot endeavors to articulate through the notion of pharmacology, in which private or collective death always, sooner or later, leads to the death of a person (TAROT 2019).



the genealogy of the Western gaze, *La religion sans les dieux* (H. Clastres 1986) shows us how the first observers deduced from the absence of cults an absence of gods, and from this absence of gods, an absence of religion. In this text, the result of research launched by the CNRS in October 1983 ("Polytheisms, for an anthropology of ancient and traditional societies") published in the multi-author volume *L'Impensable polythéisme*, edited by Francis Schmidt, Hélène Clastres proposes a fresh look at the notion of polytheism, which had long been perceived and analyzed in a negative comparison with monotheism. Indeed, in contrast to the great American empires and their imposing temples, the nomadic peoples of the forests presented no semblance of conventional religion in the eyes of the first European chroniclers, leading these observers to deny the presence of religion among these peoples. Hélène Clastres then explores how eighteenth-century thinking turned "Savages" into "Primitives", no longer radically Other, but objects that could only be thought of in negative terms, i.e., in terms of Western categories. Rather than stretching the notions of "religion", "gods" and "cults", Hélène Clastres invites us here to de-superimpose them in order to "conceive, positively, religion outside its gods and gods outside their cults". This perspective allows us to think about the categorization of religious events, not from the point of view of institutionalized and specialized religions, but in terms of practices carried out on and around the body. At a time when we have delegated the care of death and dying to the medical field, these texts by Hélène Clastres invite us to rethink the close relationship between religion, treatment and politics.

### 3.2. *Memory, death and sedentarization*

We often identify three areas in which Clastres' hypotheses about the political revolution signaled by the emergence of coercive power are deployed: demography, war and religion. Hélène's work on the funerary has features that it is interesting to place in the political anthropology of the couple. In at least two texts (H. Clastres and Lizot 1978; H. Clastres 1990b), she notes that funerary rites require the living to desert the place where the dead are buried. This nomadism linked to the dead sometimes runs counter to the usual logic governing group movements. As there are no markers to indicate the place of burial, the memory of the dead fades in one or two generations, and does not go hand in hand with any memorial cult of the dead. In her article on Tupinamba cannibalism (1972a), Hélène also touched on a memorial aspect of these societies, long considered to have no history. It is the memory of a fellow soldier taken prisoner, married, sacrificed and eaten by the enemy that helps to maintain the cycles of revenge between generations and the warlike cannibalism of



the Tupinamba. This purely warlike memory sustains a centrifugal politics, and keeps society in a state of being-for-war.

In subtext, we can see a new Clastrian hypothesis for the emergence of the State: that of sedentarization and the emergence of a cult of the dead. This relationship with nomadism as a centrifugal logic can be found in Tupí-Guaraní prophetism and the migrations that the prophets brought about in populations described as “semi-sedentary”. In addition to abandoning the norms that seemed to be perverted by the emergence of large chieftaincies, the *karai* called for the abandonment of villages where, it seems, the chiefs, breaking with the rule of matrilocality, attracted sons-in-law who had to fight for them and continued to attract women who had to do the work in the fields. Nomadism offered a way out of serfdom.

Hélène Clastres always refused to see practices and systems of representation as stable states. She brought to light the historical dynamics of peoples that we have too often tried to freeze. In her article “Rites funéraires Guayaki” (H. Clastres 1968), Hélène Clastres examines funerary rituals in two Guayaki groups, one of which practises endocannibalism, while the other buries its dead. While the rest of the ritual life of these two groups is similar (birth, initiation, etc.), Hélène Clastres explores various hypotheses that would explain the contrast in funerary practices and their historical evolution.

This perspective is reflected in Hélène Clastres’ attention to the singular force of language, whether written or spoken, here or elsewhere. Her text “De quoi parlent les Indiens” (H. Clastres 2011) resonates directly with Pierre Clastres’s “De quoi rient les Indiens”, which appeared in issue 253 of *Les Temps modernes* (P. Clastres 1967). Hélène’s article highlights a less frequent but nonetheless fundamental aspect of their reflections on language as it relates to the question of power and the sacred: the chief’s speech, whose function is not to communicate but to remind us of what constitutes the “we” of the community; the hunters’ songs, which glorify their individuality; and the prophetic word, spoken to be heard, which no longer expresses agreement and unity, but internal division – of the individual from himself, of society from itself. The relationship of cultures to orality and material traces says a great deal about their relationship to memory and transmission, and hence to the dead. Here again, there is no simplification of reality.

Lastly, the article co-authored with Solange Pinton on “La tournée des voisins” (H. Clastres and Pinton 1997) analyzes the transition from oral to written death announcements. Far from weakening the practice, this transition is, in their view, what has undoubtedly enabled the custom to endure. But in so doing, it has made another kind of memory possible, a memory that is cumulative and objectifying, and no longer a memory of

remembrance, as is the case for the Aché, who make a point of bypassing the place where the bones of a former member lie only for as long as the living remember them. This might give us food for thought about our obsessive need to preserve, which makes any social change more obvious. Societies that favor oral transmission surely have a much more pragmatic and happier lapse of memory. The archive is a reminder of the failure to preserve and sharpens the sense of loss. These societies, long thought to be crushed under the weight of tradition, show us that we are less free than we like to think.

Yet another paper, “Comment vivent les mythes. Réflexions sur la mythologie guaraní”, published in the fifteenth issue of the journal *Amerindia* (H. Clastres 1990a), can immediately be seen as a complement to Lévi-Strauss’s work on the way myths die (Lévi-Strauss 1971). For Lévi-Strauss, the question was approached synchronically, focusing on the effects of the spatial diffusion of myths. When a myth passes to a neighboring society, it sometimes assumes a different meaning, takes on a different version or changes its nature: it becomes a legend. Myths’ function then changes, they become a tool for legitimizing a new order of things and, at the same time as they die as myths, they speak of the death of a culture. Without contradicting these analyses, which she summarizes at the beginning of the article, Hélène Clastres argues in favor of a diachronic reading to understand the survival of Guaraní mythology despite the fact that society has changed. Once again, this article reflects Hélène Clastres’ attachment to the dynamism of cultures and to historicity. She also acknowledged that she had neglected the effects of the colonial situation and that their joint work had probably too often sought to isolate the Guaraní from the influences of contact (Jabin and Ruiz Zubizarreta 2024).

#### CONCLUSION. CHIEFS WITHOUT POWER, RELIGIONS WITHOUT GODS: INTERMINGLING WORKS

Pierre Clastres perhaps did not insist enough on the fact that these societies, which he calls against the State, were in many periods confronted with Empires or even endogenous dynamics that suggested the risk of a permanent relationship of command and obedience, beyond the temporary circumstances of war. His last lectures were devoted to these centripetal logics that seemed to affect the Tupí-Guaraní before the arrival of the colonists, and it should be remembered that his work remained full of force, in constant evolution and questioning, right up to his untimely death. In his last teachings, he developed some of the hypotheses that can explain the emergence of a State.

In his famous article “L’Arc et le panier”, reprinted in *La Société contre l’État*, Pierre Clastres paints a picture that seems to us today to be fraught with meaning for Clastrian exegesis:

As you might expect, women’s songs are never joyful. The themes are always death, illness and the violence of the whites, and the women take on all the pain and anguish of the Aché in the sadness of their song. The contrast with the men’s song is striking. Among the Guayaki, there seems to be a kind of sexual division of linguistic labor, whereby all the negative aspects of life are taken over by the women, whereas the men devote themselves above all to celebrating, if not the pleasures of existence, at least the values that make it bearable for them. While in her very gestures the woman hides and seems to humble herself in order to sing, or rather to weep, the hunter, by contrast, head held high and body erect, exalts himself in his song. The voice is powerful, almost brutal, sometimes feigning irritation. [...] The man speaks almost exclusively of his exploits as a hunter, the animals he has encountered, the injuries he has received, his prowess in shooting arrows. In an endlessly repeated leitmotif, he can be heard proclaiming almost obsessively: *cho rö bretete, cho rö jyvondy, cho rö yma wachu, yma chija*: “I am a great hunter, I am used to killing with my arrows, I am a powerful nature, an incensed and aggressive nature!”<sup>19</sup> (P. Clastres 1974b [1966]: 97-98).

In her Paris flat, Hélène told us that the ethnology of the couple among the Guayaki had had no effect on what either of them could see, the proof being that Pierre had been able to attend a birth (P. Clastres 1972), and that men were culturally accepted at such times, which would not have been the case among the Yanomami. However, it seems to us that although Pierre Clastres was well aware of women’s songs and their themes, it is not on these that his work focuses but rather on male speech: hunting, war, the words of ancestors and prophets. Hélène was also interested in male speech, which was essentially prophetic, but she was the only one of the

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<sup>19</sup> Our translation; original quote: “Le chant de femmes n’est, comme on peut s’y attendre, jamais joyeux. Les thèmes en sont toujours la mort, la maladie, la violence des Blancs et les femmes assument ainsi dans la tristesse de leur chant toute la peine et toute l’angoisse des Aché. Le contraste qu’il forme avec le chant des hommes est saisissant. Il semble qu’il y ait chez les Guayaki comme une division sexuelle du travail linguistique selon laquelle tous les aspects négatifs de l’existence sont pris en charge par les femmes, tandis que les hommes se vouent surtout à en célébrer sinon les plaisirs, du moins les valeurs qui la leur rendent supportable. Alors que dans ses gestes mêmes la femme se cache et paraît s’humilier pour chanter ou plutôt pour pleurer, le chasseur, au contraire, tête haute et corps bien droit, s’exalte dans son chant. La voix est puissante, presque brutale, feignant parfois l’irritation. [...] L’homme parle à peu près exclusivement de ses exploits de chasseur, des animaux qu’il a rencontrés, des blessures qu’il en a reçues, de son habileté à décocher la flèche. Leitmotiv indéfiniment répété, on l’entend proclamer de manière presque obsessionnelle: *cho rö bretete, cho rö jyvondy, cho rö yma wachu, yma chija*: ‘Je suis un grand chasseur, j’ai coutume de tuer avec mes flèches, je suis une nature puissante, une nature irritée et agressive!’”.

couple to attach such importance to the themes of female discourse: death and illness.

After Pierre Clastres's sudden death in 1977, H  l  ne Clastres undertook a vast project to promote and disseminate his work, in particular with Miguel Abensour, Anne Kupiec and Christian Ferri   later on. In 2011, she set up the "Pierre Clastres" collection and deposited it with the Institut m  moire de l'  dition contemporaine (IMEC). These archives show the importance of H  l  ne's role in Pierre Clastres' work. This is particularly evident in the data collection and transcription of his field notebooks and typescripts. She truly sculpted Pierre Clastres' writings. What's more, their close relationships bear witness to a fusional working relationship and an intellectual synergy that built many bridges between their thinking, even though they never wrote together, and each developed an individual approach to the cultures they observed. Without her, it is highly probable that Pierre would not have been able to produce the major work he left us, nor would he have achieved his renown. But H  l  ne also offers us her own contributions, with notable additions to the anthropology of religion through her in-depth study of the myths of the land-without-evil (H. Clastres 1975), her exploration of the conception and functions of Tup  -Guaran   prophecies, and in the history of ideas, through her analysis of the representation of "Savages" in missionary accounts and the ideology of the conquest of the New World.

Chiefs without power, religions without gods. This is the astonishing discovery of H  l  ne and Pierre Clastres, in the heart of tropical South America. While Europe was dreaming of a more egalitarian and libertarian world, in the 1960s and 1970s the Clastres helped create new political imaginaries rooted in the concrete utopias of the Amerindian peoples. After the untimely death of her partner, H  l  ne continued her research. Yet her name remains hidden in the shadow of Pierre Clastres' masterly work – often at her own request. Following in her footsteps, we invite you to discover or rediscover her generous legacy.

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