

The utopia of a healthy land: leprosy reports in the Portuguese colonial America

Ana Carolina de CARVALHO VIOTTI¹

(1) Department of History, São Paulo State University, Franca, São Paulo, Brazil.

Abstract

Pero Vaz de Caminha has written, in the first letter about America that “the land itself has a good atmosphere”. This statement would be repeated throughout the colonial period in chronic, letters, travel reports and other books, until the paradisiac image of Brazil was replaced by an idea of an unhealthy place to be in. One of the elements that corroborated with such turn around on the descriptions about the tropics was the emergency of all sorts of diseases: fevers, smallpox, syphilis, measles, animal bites made the life in the South become tough. One of them, well known of the Europeans - and believed not to exist on such land - called the attention and the worries of the settlers: leprosy. Believed to be a sign of God’s anger with human behaviour, leper meant both insalubrity to the place and punishment to men.

The purpose of this brief article is to follow the paths of the procedures taken against such contagious disease in colonial Brazil, highlighting the main actions to prevent the spread of decease and the sins all over the Portuguese America. It is argued that slaves were blamed as the main responsible for the dissemination of that evil. Leper challenged the utopia of a healthy land, and the utopia of a cure was nurtured by the isolation, a sort of “death in life”.

Keywords: Health, leper, Colonial Brazil, Leper Hospitals.