





ANTHROPOLOGY

# The album of the patriarchal family

Thesis brings together the conflicting visions of Nelson Rodrigues and Gilberto Freyre on the Brazilians' household upbringing

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In just one thesis, Brazilian anthropology and theater won new interpretations at the end of last year. With the supervision of eminent anthropologist Gilberto Velho and defended by historian Adriana Facina, the doctoral thesis *Saints and Scoundrels – An Anthropological Analysis of the Work of Nelson Rodrigues*, which is to be turned into a book before the end of this year, does a reading of how the theater and journalistic production of Nelson Rodrigues portrays a vision of the world present in several portions of society in his days, and not just the work of the author.

The challenge for the researcher was to develop an anthropological work without the possibility of using the classic methodologies of anthropology: field work and participative observation. Moreover, there had to be the conviction that a work not belonging to the tradition of national thinking could be analyzed under this prism. To overcome these impasses, Adriana opted to bring anthropology closer to history, taking out of the Rodriguean documents – his plays, chronicles and newspaper articles – the substrate for her research. Material published in the press on Nelson Rodrigues' theater was also taken into account.

The result is a text divided into four chapters that do a clear analysis of the work of Nelson Rodrigues, developed in several domains – from the public opinion of the polemical dramatist to the representations of family and of the city in his plays. Adriana goes so far as to draw up a parallel between the theatrical works by Nelson Rodrigues and the studies by Gilberto Freyre on colonial Brazil. At the end, she does an analysis of the conservatism that took hold of Nelson's journalistic texts during the military dictatorship. "The central idea that orients this extensive set of sources is that there is, in the work of Nelson Rodrigues, a construction of a vision of human nature that oscillates between a profound pessimism and the search for possibilities of redemption", Adriana explains.

This ambiguity with which Rodrigues saw human nature, and which gave origin to the "saints and scoundrels" of the title, was accompanied by an oscillation of opinions about his work



Illustration by Cícero Dias for the 1933 edition of *Casa Grande & Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves)

## Gilberto Freyre's men and women

In the year that *Casa Grande & Senzala* [The Masters and the Slaves] completes 70 years, two unusual studies on the life and work of Gilberto Freyre are awaiting support from publishers to come out of the oven. The book *A Festa do Sexo – O Masculino e o Feminino na Obra de Gilberto Freyre* [The Festival of Sex – Female and Male in the Work of Gilberto Freyre], by Fátima Quintas, does an analysis of the description that Freyre makes of women in Colonial Brazil in *Casa Grande & Senzala* and in *Sobrados e Mucamos* [The Mansions and the Shanties]. Also under her coordination, a project still without a title gathers together 50 interviews with the anthropologist, published in newspapers and magazines.

The executive secretary of the Nucleus of Freyrian Studies at the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, in Recife, Fátima Quintas published *Sexo e Marginalidade* [Sex and Being on the Fringe of Society] (Vozes, 1987) and *A Mulher e a Família no Final do Século* [Woman and the Family at the End of the Century] (Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, 2000). She soon noted that Freyre was the first anthro-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AGENCIA ESTÁDO

Gilberto Freyre (above) and Nelson Rodrigues: according to the author, Freyre had a more optimistic vision that the carioca playwright

at the beginning of his career. Nelson Rodrigues wrote his first play for the theater, *A Mulher sem Pecado* [The Woman without Sin] in 1941, confessedly to make some money – he used to be a sports reporter with *O Globo*. While he was writing the second act, he discovered he had talent. And it was his second text, *Vestido de Noiva* [The Wedding Dress] (1943), regarded as a landmark in modern Brazilian dramaturgy that made Nelson fall into the good graces of the best theater critics, who came to regard him as a genius without precedent.

However, with *Álbum de Família* [Family Album] (1946), Nelson Rodrigues was execrated by the public and the critics for showing, with all frankness, a story based on incestuous relations: parents who love their children and vice-versa, a brother who desires his sister, sister-in-law in love with brother-in-law. He was turned into an accursed, degenerate author, who perturbed Brazilian

families with his treacherous, lascivious and ambiguous personages.

**B**ut, as Adriana's thesis suggests, it is precisely these apparently perturbed personages that can draw Nelson Rodrigues closer to Gilberto Freyre. Besides both of them having come from Pernambuco and having held a mutual admiration for each other, Freyre and Rodrigues had the Brazilian family at the center of their works – one anthropological, the other theatrical. Accordingly, the representation of the Rodriguean family, which maintains incestuous relations and is also a victim of treachery and violence, could be the continuity of the patriarchal and endogamic family described by Freyre in works like *Casa Grande & Senzala* [The Masters and the Slaves] (read more above), but turned inside out.

"Rodrigues was doing a criticism of the model shown by Freyre", says Adria-

na. "While Gilberto Freyre saw in the patriarchal family a civilizational system of the colonial period, Rodrigues, who was writing at another moment of history, captured the moment that this family was crumbling", the researcher explains. A result of this crumbling, according to her, is the strong presence of the female element as something diabolical. The woman who betrays or who seduces her relative is a woman in search of an individuation that did not exist in the patriarchal family of an older rural Brazil. "The quest for individuation of the Rodriguean personages is also a reflection of the urban environment", she says. "Gilberto Freyre had a much more optimistic vision than Nelson Rodrigues, as far as this patriarchal family is concerned", in Adriana's comparison.

Nelson Rodrigues' pessimism lay in the very reasons that led him to put into his dramaturgy the most frightening specters of human nature. "For him, the more horrors, the more the theater puts

polologist to contextualize woman in the history of Brazil. “He showed how this woman was oppressed and subjugated to the patriarchal system”, the researcher comments.

Oppression affected mainly the Portuguese vertex of the colonizing triangle. “Portuguese women were extremely oppressed sexually”, Fátima explains. Besides having attributed to her only the role of procreation, the Portuguese woman was prematurely introduced into a perverse endogamic system, in which cousins, uncles and aunts, and even brothers and sisters used to intermarry. “They had to marry, at the age of 12 or 13, with men they didn’t like. They were pregnant all the time, and often died early in one of the childbirths”, says the researcher.

The situation was aggravated by the sugar-making system itself. Extremely sedentary, they women would stay most of the time at home, eating the sweets and tidbits produced in the Mansion. “They would become obese and often unattractive”, the researcher comments. It is not difficult to imagine that it was common

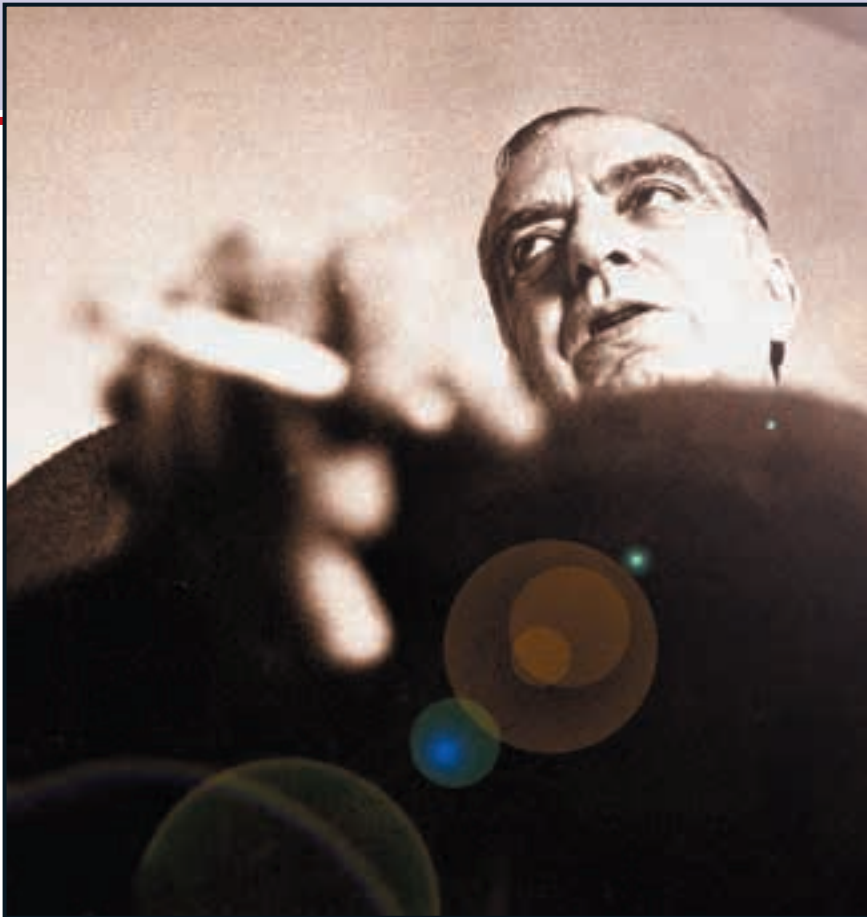
for the lord of the mill to seek sexual pleasure more outside marriage than inside it. This was one of the gates of entry for black women to take on an important role in the day to day at the Mansion.

“The Portuguese woman was obliged to live with the betrayal of her husband, who kept an intense relationship with the ‘mammies’”, Fátima went on. Added to the sexual attraction, there was affectivity, for the fact that the slave women wet-nursed the children born to the white women. “The Portuguese women didn’t have wet nurses because they wanted to, but because, always being pregnant, they were not able to breastfeed as well”, Fátima explains. The intimacy between the white and black women often made the ladies of the sugar mill give vent to their cruelty. “In a passage from *Casa Grande & Senzala*, a lady orders the mammy’s eyeballs to be pulled out and served on a platter to the patriarch”, says Fátima.

Although Indian women did not have an obligatory presence in the internal architecture of the Mansion, Fátima did not leave them out of her

study. The contact between the Indian women and the Portuguese men was one of great ‘sexual intoxication’, according to Freyre”, she says. Several reasons facilitated the relations between the Portuguese men and the Indian women. First, the nomadic nature of the autochthonous culture, with the long absences of the Indian men. Next, the absence of the notion of betrayal at the heart of this culture.

Besides being unprecedented for its times, the presentation that Gilberto Freyre made of the female universe in colonial Brazil denotes, in Fátima’s opinion, a personal characteristic that the anthropologist knew how to lend to his work. “Freyre would use all his senses to expand his knowledge”, says she. It was these personal characteristics that the researcher wanted to capture in the interviews selected for her other project. “Besides being autobiographical, the interviews contain the essence of Freyrian thinking”, Fátima reckons. Among the conversations, there is one famous one, from 1980, in which Freyre told Playboy magazine that, for him, you had to know all the angles of life. Accordingly, he had already tried out homosexuality – and, in the end, opted for heterosexuality.



on stage this dimension of the dark side of human nature, the more theater can have a purifying function”, Adriana comments. “It’s as if human beings, when confronted with the more satanic aspect of their nature, could purge themselves of this, at least in part. For Nelson, this is the function of the theater”, the researcher concludes.

In her thesis, Adriana analyzes Nelson Rodrigues’ journalistic production at two moments. At the first, in the 50s, with his daily column *A Vida Como Ela É* [Life as It Is], Nelson Rodrigues took advantage of this privileged space to give backing to his theatrical creation. “The tales were important to officialize the scoundrel image, and they also served as a laboratory for his plays”, Adriana explains. Then in the 60s and 70s, Rodrigues used journalism to show his radicalism with regard to left-wing notions, surprising many by his engagement with the military and with his attack on confrontationist intellectuality in general. •