

GILBERTO FREYRE AND THE BRAZILIAN NORTHEAST: ANALYTICAL NOTES

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Dilton C. S. Maynard, PhD - *Professor at the Federal University of Sergipe and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro*

Elayne Messias Passos, PhD- *Visiting Scholar at Federal University of Sergipe*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Gilberto Freyre's seminal work *Nordeste* (1937) as a foundational interpretation of Brazil's Northeast, highlighting its selective focus on the agrarian, sugarcane-producing coastal zone while also acknowledging the region's broader socio-geographic diversity. Freyre's approach—shaped by anthropological influences, particularly those of Franz Boas—privileges cultural and historical processes over economic determinism, constructing a vision of the Northeast characterized by both opulence and decadence, tradition and modernity. By analyzing Freyre's nostalgic and impressionistic prose, this paper highlights his emphasis on the legacy of the sugar aristocracy, portraying it as a stabilizing force amid modernization. Scholars such as Albuquerque (1999) and Silveira (1984) contextualize Freyre's intellectual project, showing how his narrative both reflects and transcends oligarchic historiography by synthesizing environmental, cultural, and aesthetic concerns. Ultimately, *Nordeste* consolidates Freyre's broader interpretive framework, offering a lasting—though contested—vision of regional identity that continues to shape discourse on the Brazilian Northeast.

KEY WORDS

Gilberto Freyre, Brazilian Northeast, regional identity, sugarcane aristocracy, cultural history, *Nordeste*

The Brazilian Northeast has long been the subject of sustained scholarly inquiry. Over time, numerous authors have taken on the demanding task of documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the region. Although many intellectuals have aspired to formulate an original and enduring account of this region, none has exerted greater intellectual and cultural influence than Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987).

Freyre produced a body of work that interprets Brazil's colonial past through anthropological perspectives shaped in part by his engagement with figures such as Franz Boas (1858–1942). His native region served as the central locus of his reflections, giving rise to a distinctive and foundational interpretation of the Northeast. Less concerned with economic determinants than with cultural and historical processes, the “Master of Apipucos” sought to uncover the region's formative “roots.”

In Freyre's prose, the Northeast emerges as a space simultaneously marked by opulence and decadence. Among his publications, *Nordeste* is particularly emblematic. First published in 1937 by Livraria

José Olympio and later reissued in multiple editions, the work raises a fundamental question: which “Northeast” does Freyre portray?

The answer is given in the preface to the first edition. Acknowledging the existence of at least two Northeast— the agrarian and the pastoral—Freyre specifies: “Here, the aim is only to examine closely the agrarian one: the sugarcane-producing Northeast, which stretches across massapê soils and floodplains, from northern Bahia to Maranhão, never straying far from the coast” (Freyre, 1937/2004, p. 9). In the same preface, he describes **Nordeste** as an “impressionistic essay” concerned with “the most essential aspects” of the region.

The rationale for this selective focus has been examined by Albuquerque (1999) in **A invenção do Nordeste**. He observes that, “while recognizing the internal diversity of the Northeast by referring to the other Northeast of scorching, creaking sands, Freyre weaves an imagistic-discursive unity based on the sugarcane Northeast, since the region of hard, dry lands would be more suited as the basis for a discourse whose strategy was to denounce the social conditions of the region.” This choice, he argues, aligns with Freyre’s intellectual and aesthetic project.

In **Nordeste**, Freyre reconstructs the memory of the sugar aristocracy and its traditions—traditions which, within the context of modernization, could function as stabilizing anchors. His prose, notably, tends to avoid overt confrontation. As Albuquerque (1999) further notes, the utopia envisioned by the author of **Casa-Grande & Senzala** is “the emergence of a society in which technology is not an enemy of tradition, where technology and art are allied, and tradition and modernity walk together, always under the primacy of a harmonious balance between past and present.”

Accordingly, **Nordeste** is interspersed with passages of pronounced nostalgia, verging on lyrical evocations of the past. Still in the preface, Freyre (1937/2004) asserts that “the massapê lands were, in Brazil, par excellence the lands of good manners and gentle gestures, where, throughout the nineteenth century, men grew up suckled by plump Black women of great sweetness, and drank tea from a very young age” (p. 13).

Nevertheless, as Silveira (1984) argues in **O regionalismo nordestino: existência e consciência**, such a strong attachment to the past does not necessarily situate Freyre’s work within oligarchic historiography: “Born in the context of the oligarchies—more precisely, during their crisis of adjustment to a class-based society, whose political expression was the collapse of the Old Republic—Freyre’s work (...) modernized both form and content, and questioned the prevailing explanations of the time” (p. 22).

Through **Nordeste**, Freyre articulates a coherent interpretative framework for understanding the region—an approach already foreshadowed in earlier works such as the **Manifesto Regionalista** (1926) and consolidated in his seminal **Casa-Grande & Senzala** (1933). Although partially conceived as an effort to highlight the plight of a declining region, the work ultimately transcends this objective by engaging with environmental considerations and examining the formative role of cultural exchange in shaping the Northeast’s historical trajectory.

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