

The Traveling Troubadours of Brazil's Backlands

By LARRY ROHTER

CARUARU, Brazil — They are the bards of the backlands, traveling with their poems from town to town and market to market. Practitioners of an art form that originated in medieval Europe and is now mostly obsolete elsewhere, they nonetheless continue to thrive here.

"Cordel" is the name given to their craft, which developed in this arid outback of northeast Brazil, in isolated peasant communities that valued the spoken or sung word over the written. As befits a do-it-yourself, indigenous art form, the same balladeers who create the poems, inspired by current events or ancient legends, are usually the ones who print, illustrate and hawk them.

"Like so many other folk forms, cordel transforms an old vocabulary to fit new situations," said Candace

Slater, author of "Stories on a String" and professor of humanities at the University of California, Berkeley. "What has not changed is that cordel poets are still writing for the group, and that what they write continues to touch a nerve in the people of northeast Brazil, no matter where they happen to be living."

"Cordel" literally means string or twine, a reference to the way the cheap paper booklets containing the poems, with up to 32 pages, are hung at markets or newsstands. Verses typically have six lines, and though a variety of rhyme scheme are permitted, the most common is probably a-b-c-b-d-b.

Originally, cordel was an extension of the European troubadour tradition. Cordel poets and singers would roam the vast interior of northeast Brazil, an area larger than Alaska and home today to 50 million people, showing up at markets such

Poetry inspired by current events and ancient folklore.

as the one held here every Saturday, or at fairs, saints' day commemorations and other public events, to recite their ballads, bringing both news and entertainment to peasants who were often illiterate.

"Popular literature in verse form developed here in Brazil as in no other place in the world," said Audálio Dantas, a collector of cordel and curator of "A Century of Cordel," an exhibition that was held in São Paulo in 2001. "The cordel pamphlet was for decades practically the only vehicle of information that the people of the

Continued on Page 7



John Maier for The New York Times

José Severino Cristóvão, one of Brazil's best-known cordel poets, sells the 90 titles he has written at a marketplace in Caruaru, Brazil.



The New York Times

Cordel, a form of folk poetry, continues to thrive in Caruaru, Brazil.

Continued From First Arts Page

backlands could count on."

But with the rise of radio, then television and now of the Internet, the main focus of cordel gradually shifted to amusing the reader or listener. Nevertheless, when a lion devoured a young child at a circus near here not long ago, the incident quickly became the subject of a cordel, and within days of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, cordel pamphlets interpreting the event were circulating in the hinterland.

"We are minstrel poets because what we write is in rhyme and comes from our imagination," said José João dos Santos, who under the pen name Azulado, or Big Blue, has written and published more than 300 cordel titles. "But I'm a journalist too, bringing the news to the poor and the unlettered in a form that they understand and trust more than newspapers or television."

Most of the poets come from the same background as their audience. For instance, José Francisco Borges, who dropped out of school at the age of 12 and is today perhaps the most celebrated master of the art, has worked as a bricklayer, herb seller, farmhand, carpenter and potter.

Whatever they lack in schooling, cordel poets are creative and quick-witted. When Abraao Batista was asked what made him become a poet, he replied: "Well, I went to the moon, found St. George and the saints conversing, and they gave me their benediction. Ever since then, I've been jumping about in time and space."

As indicated by pamphlets like "The Girl Who Beat Her Mother and Was Turned Into a Dog" and "The Girl Who Married 14 Times and Continued Virgin," cordel often imparts a moral, with clearly defined heroes and villains. Other titles, such as "The Woman Who Put the Devil in a Bottle" or "The Man Who Married a Donkey," are meant to be fanciful or comical.

Another favorite topic is the adventures of Lampião, a Robin Hood-like bandit who eluded police for more than a decade before he was hunted down and killed near here in 1938.

Cordel poets say, though, that the best-selling title ever is "The Romance of the Mysterious Peacock." Set in the distant Mediterranean, it tells the story of a young man who, frustrated that his beloved is being held captive by her father, obtains a mechanical peacock that enables him to rescue her. The two elope, and his father-in-law dies and the couple become his heirs.

"Some of the most popular stories can be traced back to European legends, to Charlemagne in the 10th century, but most originated in Iberia in the late 16th and 17th centuries," said Mark Curran, a professor at Arizona



Photographs by John Maier for The New York Times

José Francisco Borges, above, who dropped out of school at the age of 12, is perhaps the most celebrated master of the art. Left, a carving by Mr. Borges.



State University who has written several books on cordel. "Yet the genius of these stories is that even the ones that come from the Orient have been totally adapted and recreated to suit the circumstances of the Brazilian northeast."

José Ferreira da Silva, a poet here who writes under the name Dila, said: "Certain subjects just never go out of style in cordel and will always sell. I've written so many pamphlets about Lampião that I've lost count, at least 200."

Educated Brazilians originally looked down on cordel and the rough woodcut covers associated with it as something vulgar and déclassé, a symbol of the country's backward-

ness. But today, intellectuals in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are collectors or admirers of the pamphlets, and the aesthetics of cordel can be detected in nearly every corner of Brazilian popular culture.

"The cordel poets will all say that the interest in their work has grown mostly because of foreigners," Dr. Curran said. "But I think Brazil has reached a time of change in which there is more of an awareness of and hunger for seeking the country's cultural roots, and cordel is a major part of Brazilian culture in the 20th century."

In pop music, for instance, cutting-edge composers much admired outside Brazil have drawn on cordel in



José Ferreira da Silva often writes about Lampião, a Robin Hood figure.

songs like Tom Zé's "The Arrival of Raul Seixas and Lampião at the I.M.F." and Chico Science's "Isaac Asimov and Santos Dumont's Meeting in Heaven." In literature, Jorge Amado's novel "Tereza Batista: Home from the Wars" and Ariano Suassuna's play "The History of the Headless King Who Wandered the Wilds of the Backlands" are heavily influenced by cordel in subject and form.

With titles such as "The Cordel of Sexually Transmitted Diseases" and "Agrarian Reform Has to Be the Right of Every Brazilian," the federal and state governments also have been using the form to promote health, traffic safety, political awareness, AIDS avoidance and other official campaigns. And politicians and businessmen in small towns in the northeast often turn to cordel to promote their candidacies or their products.

"Not long ago, a lawyer whose daughter was about to get married even came to me and asked me to write the invitations in cordel verse," said José Severino Cristóvão, a poet here.

As for the woodcuts that adorn the covers of cordel pamphlets, they have evolved into a full-fledged art form. Mr. Borges's work has been shown at the Louvre and the Smithsonian. But at his market stand here, he also sells T-shirts and ceramic tiles stamped with images from the woodcuts.

"People have been saying cordel is doomed since the 1920's," Dr. Slater said. "But the creative energy is still there today; it's just being channeled in different ways. Cordel has always been a hybrid form, able to incorporate new influences. Its ability to become different things may disappoint people who want it to be what it was back in the 1940's or 1970's, but that adaptability is exactly where its creative survival resides."