

The Charm of an Old Tradition: The *Cordel* Literature in Brazil

Marcus Baccega

Federal University of Maranhão, São Luís Do Maranhão, Brazil

This communication aims at presenting and analyzing the chapbooks' tradition in the Northeastern part of Brazil. The so-called *cordel* literature stands for an inveterate written tradition pertaining to this part of Brazil, which was the first structured focus of Portuguese settlement in the Southern region of the American continent. The *cordel* chapbooks deal with a large amount of topics and themes, ranging from politics to religious contents. For all it seems that this is a Brazilian invention; the chapbooks' tradition dates back to late Middle Ages in Europe, specially Portugal, Castille, France, the Holy Roman Empire, and even England. This old tradition has already vanished in Europe, yet continues to take place in countries such as Brazil and Mexico (*pliegos sueltos*). Rather than just a medieval bequest, we propose that the chapbooks' popular literature in Brazil is a sort of late echo from the chevaleresque romances from High Middle Ages (11th-13th centuries), henceforth a sort of cultural translation of our medieval background in the scope of an interlarded culture such as the Brazilian one. For such purpose, we draw upon Homi Bhabha's theory of *cultural translation* and on Luís Weckmann's idea of a medieval heritage in Brazil and Mexico.

Keywords: *cordel*, Middle Ages, cultural tradition

Introduction

As we have already pointed out on other opportunities, Brazil is endowed with a manifold, long-term medieval tradition brought about by the successive European settlement waves, from the 16th century onwards. One of the most charming medieval bequest pertaining to Brazil is the so-called *Cordel* literature, which has been present to popular culture since the very beginning of colonization. Nowadays, as we shall state, it has reached a very modern, multimedia pattern of production and transmission. *Cordel* literature is comprised by chapbooks written and published by popular poets, who sometimes print the booklets with own resources. These chapbooks used to be sold hanging from strings or wire in local markets, grocer's shops and, less often, in bookstores.

Nowadays, one can find Facebook and Instagram pages and sites for poets' profiles, exhibiting virtual chapbook compositions, as well as even one television program with a session devoted to *Cordel*, in the most powerful media outlet in Brazil, i.e., Rede Globo (Gshow). Nevertheless, *cordel* chapbooks were originally brochures of 17 cm by 12 cm, made of 8, 16, 24, or 48 pages, mostly 8 pages in case of news chapbooks, the most common type on our days.

In this paper, we aim at scruting and analyzing the roots of this inveterate popular tradition, which will definitely lead us to the late-medieval romances and the Portuguese tradition of *folhas volantes* ("flying

sheets”). As a matter of fact, this denomination, *cordel*, is of recent usage in Brazil, having been preferred by intellectuals rather than poets themselves. Actually, academic researchers dedicated to investigating *cordel* literature have taken the name from Portuguese usage during the 1950’s. Beforehand, in Brazilian popular culture, this literary manifestation used to be named *folhetos* (“leaflets”), *foietes*, *arrecifes* (“reefs”), *história em versos* (“verse stories”), *ABC’s*, *livros de Athayde* (“Athayde’s books”) or, lastly, *folhetes*, because of the shape of the booklets (Camelo, 2014).

Actually, Brazilian chapbooks deal with a huge variety of topics, ranging from nowadays characteristics, political contingencies and, last but not least, oral traditions from a very ancient source. In a recent historical period, these chapbooks were one of the few communication technologies for collective information in remote parts of the Northeastern hinterland of Brazil, where books were really scarce and seldom able to be read by a semi-illiterate public. By the way, *cordel* narratives belonged to oral literature until the late 19th century, when they started being printed. At first, chapbooks’ contents used to be declaimed aloud, in order to draw people’s attention.

Concerning this aspect, a prominent *cordel* researcher from the State University of Maranhão (UEMA), Professor Júlia Constança P. Camelo asserts that for many dwellers of the Northeastern hinterland, chapbooks were the only news bearer believed to be faithful to the real happenings, even after many families began listening to the radio (Camelo, 2014).

So, let us uncover some of the secrets underlying *cordel* tradition in Brazil throughout the centuries.

The Structure of Chapbook Literature: The Form of *Cordel*

According to Amanda Muniz da Silva, the chapbooks’ tradition alludes to a historical context which persisted until the final decades of the 20th century, during which *cordel* was the only communication means for many hinterland dwellers in the Northeastern remote parts of Brazil. During the 19th century, mainly in the first decades, over half of the chapbooks contained poems concerning social occurrences, including topics as taxes, banditism (*Cangaço*), low wages, draught, workers’ exploitation, and the general life of Northeastern populations (Silva, 2023).

In spite of its satirical tenor, *Cordel* chapbooks do not always deal with serious matters by a comic bias. For Francisco Marques and Ezequiel Gomes da Silva:

Despite the strong satirical tenor, *Cordel* literature does not always treat serious matters by a comic bias. This is, indeed, one more resistance strategy as to unmask reigning hypocrisy and defeat arbitrary deliberations which affect the lives of poor Brazilians who are paid low wages. Drawing on the same technique as ancient travelers, who diffused the news of their trips in medieval Europe by means of leaflets, nowadays poets, actually bearing a similar world view as that of the medieval chapbooks, not seldom resorting to the technique of exaggeration, to proverbs and popular sayings, keep the readers uptodate with recent happenings, yet always in accordance with their public’s axiology (our translation). (Marques & Silva, 2020, pp. 43-44)

On many occasions, chapbooks’ contents are communicated by duels between two poets, both attempting to react to the last verses of the opponent, by pronouncing new, improvised verses, with absolutely no delay in replying to the other poet. This disputatio ends when one of contenders fails to reply to the opponent and gives up and declares himself unable to continue the strife.

It is about time we caught a glimpse of a definition pertaining to *cordel* literature. For such purpose, we should like to resort to the classic work of Brazilian folklorist Lu í da Câmara Cascudo. In his always uptodate

Dictionary of the Brazilian Folklore (2004), this researcher avers that *Literatura de Cordel* is a Portuguese designation which has been divulged throughout Brazil since the 1960's. As we have already remarked, this denomination is associated to the printed booklets composed in the Northeast of Brazil and nowadays widespread throughout the whole country. The name is derived from the fact that these booklets were disposed to sale pending from strings, as is the case in some parts of Brazil until our days (Cascardo, 2012, pp. 398-399).

Relying on Cãmara Cascardo, *Cordel* literature is sometimes called *Blinds' Literature*, which alludes to the fact that, in Portugal, under King Dom Joã V (r. 1706-1750), the monopoly of chapbooks' sales was attributed to the Brotherhood of Jesus, the Infant of the Blind Men of Lisbon, by the royal provision of January, 7th, 1749 (Cascardo, 2012: p. 399). Actually, Portuguese booklets bear a strong resemblance to the French *Litt é rature de Colportage*, the English chapbooks and German *Volksbücher*. For Cãmara Cascardo, the main trait concerning the *Cordel* Literature is its graphic destination, prompting its circulation in small printed works, since the second half of the 19th century (Cascardo, 2012, p. 399).

Furthermore, the chapbooks literature is also referred to what Paul S ébillot defined as *Oral Literature* in this work *Litt é rature Orale de la Haute-Bretagne* (1881). It entails legends, myths, tales, deviation, and popular sayings which have become traditional or denote a narrative, a story. To sum up, *Oral Literature* deals with every cultural manifestation bearing a literary background, which is transmitted by non-graphic means. Besides, Cãmara Cascardo mentions the work of Professor Nelson Ramos, for whom the Latin word *fabula* derives from *fari*, which means *to speak*. Therefore, a fable is a conversation, a narrative, mostly on *res fictae*, which alludes to a frivolous dialogue, a tale, a short story, an anecdote and afterwards theatre plays, narration and representation of unreal scenes (Cascardo, 2012, p. 399).

In the same respect, Cãmara Cascardo lectures that *fabulari* refers to a conversation, as well as *loquor* ("to speak"), yet in relation to a serious situation (*fala* or *loquela*). In the same context, *rem fabulare* means narrating a story, telling a hearsay, news, and sayings in general. For this author, there has always been the habit of tinting and blending the speech, leaving imagination free to creative composing (Cascardo, 2012, p. 399).

Traditional communities, such as semi-illiterate, hinterland populations of Northeastern Brazil tend to look upon the prodigious strength of the word pronounced by those capable of making them come true. Hence, traditional communities are used to divinising the *factum* with the significance of what was, in the beginning of time, declared or sentenced, i.e., fate, what must be. It could also mean the unknown, the tenebrous, the uncertain. In such collectivities, there is a confuse state of indetermination underlying the sense of fable. Cãmara Cascardo refers to the most influential Rhetoric book of the Early Middle Ages, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 8, 13: *fabula est quae neque veras neque verosimiles continet res*. That is the reason why some erudite Roman writers such as Cicero, Seneca and even the Emperor Marcus Aurelius did include, under the sign of fable, theatre plays, literary production prone to be staged. In this respect, fables have come to be allegoric narratives. Thus, it is not properly fake narration, yet what is imagined, figured out, in order to teach pleasantly (Cascardo, 2012, p. 400).

In these terms, chapbooks literature seems to be closer to the fable than to myth. Actually, Cãmara Cascardo defines myth in a manner close to the notion proposed by Mircea Eliade in his book *Myth and Reality* (1963). It is the set of legends or narratives linked to characters or deeds prior to historical facts, henceforth being mingled with fantastic or marvellous episodes (Eliade, 2005). For the Brazilian folklorist, the truth about

myths is that we do confuse real events and fairy imagining. “In the confusion of mental shadows are founded the mythological creations which are transmitted in many different colours from one generation to another throughout the eras” (our translation) (Cascardo, 2012, pp. 401-402).

Hence, should we affirm that *Cordel* literature is closer to fable than to myth, we would necessarily need to take into account the legendary nature of such chapbooks. In accordance with Câmara Cascardo, *legend* (from the Latin *legenda*) alludes to a narrative of disfigured facts due to popular imagination (Cascardo, 2012, p. 400). Were these legends to be told in a pleasant way, they would be promptly accepted as treasures of human imagination, though already disfigured or intentionally unreal, by dint of their simple symbolism. They became impregnated in people’s memories and repository of ancient glories or stimuli.

Furthermore, the chapbooks are related to the idea of *tale*, a summarized narrative of fictitious episodes. Indeed, nothing rather substantial distinguishes a tale (from the Latin *comptus*, summary), from the *romance* itself, both being fictional. Resorting to French lexicographer Émile Littré Câmara Cascardo avers that *tale* is a rather general word, encompassing very short tales and longer romances. The same occurs with the concept of *novel*, which tends to be defined as a short romance. However, the tale can either be an account of events or a narrative of fictitious nature. One can conceive a tale, novel, or romance as “true” if they do not falsify archetypes expressed by authors in their original writings. All in all, romances, novels, or tales seem to make efforts to collect and reproduce strange soul feelings, vibrations, dreams, light, and darkness. An obvious conclusion is that *Cordel* chapbooks do evolve tales, novels, or romances of a rather short dimension.

In other book, *Oral Literature in Brazil* (1952), Câmara Cascardo affirms the background unity of oral literature and formal, erudite literature. Beside the popular processes of conservation of themes and their circulation and modification of initial and final formulas, oral literature gets adapted to habits, mentalities, flora and fauna, and different ambiances. It is essentially the novelistic, the existence of literary subjects that have been dealt with for 500 or 600 years by writers and poets, ascertained in tales, anecdotes, cases (Cascardo, 2006, pp. 22-23).

As a matter of fact, oral literature, including chapbooks’ literature, even though they have got printed, has to do with folklore. In this respect, Câmara Cascardo attests that there is only folklore when the same society is pervaded by two cultural levels in unending dialogue. Moreover, folklore is characterized by oldness, endurance, and anonymity, either with typographic anchorage or not. For the Brazilian folklorist, in order to be folkloric, a cultural manifestation must be chronologically indetermined. One can even attempt to circumscribe an approximate epoch, yet it can never be shorter than a decade (Cascardo, 2006, pp. 25-26).

Actually, the suffix *lore* in *folklore* stands for the ensemble of all rules, usages, customs, predilections, and mentalities, which are the so-called *folkways*. The latter become stratified in public sensibility within the process of seeing, assimilated, understanding and producing. Câmara Cascardo evokes the renowned anthropologist Marcel Mauss in order to testify that *popular* is everything that is not official (Cascardo, 2006, p. 24).

It is highly worthy to read Câmara Cascardo’s distinction between formal and oral literature:

The histories of literature assign the intellectual ideas in their repercussion. Official ideas from the literary movements born in cities, from erudite reactions, from renewal movements of a mental revolution. The field is always checkered by important names, bibliographic quotations, psychological analyses by the masters, reasons of literary attacks and defenses. The replacement of intellectual myths, fights of iconoclasts against devouts, of fanatics and skeptical ones, is absorbed into creative or pamphleteer narratives. Oral Literature seems not to exist. Beside that world of classics, romantics, naturalists

and independent ones who fight, discuss, aware of the stable attention of the public, another literature, with no name in its antiquity alive and soundful, nourished by the perpetual sources of imagination, collaborator of primitive creation, with its genders, finalities, vibration and movement, continues, eternal and rumorously, ignored but obstinate, like a stream in loneliness or a waterfall in the middle of the wood (our translation). (Cascudo, 2006, p. 25)

In our view, Câmara Cascudo could not be more assertive! In fact, formal literature as we conceive it, attached to modern or whilom rites, to literary movements and individual preferences, is defined by the Brazilian folklorist as a sheer intellectual and reflective action. Its elderly sister, oral literature, which is pristine and popular, acts out by speaking up, singing, staging, dancing amidst the people, in the farms' lands, in the courtyards of churches, during the night prayers, in traditional parties belonging to the cattle cycle, in the balls celebrating the end of sugar harvest, in the feasts of Saints.

By dint of the fear of being forgotten, some *cordel* composers still follow traditional metric rules, specially the sextilla, the stanza of six verses, which is mainly composed with verses of five or seven poetic syllables, the so called round verses. For greater narratives, poets tend to prefer stanzas of ten verses, always with five or seven poetic syllables. Márcia Abreu states that some great names of the *Cordel* literature have established the habit of following these metric rules, such as Leandro Gomes de Barros (the first poet to have his chapbooks printed in new technical manner) and João Martins de Athayde (Abreu, 2011, p. 52).

Differently from the Portuguese *Cordel*, Brazilian chapbooks feature a peculiar way of production, circulation, and reception. The Northeastern *Cordel* displays some traits which allow us to define this literary gender. In opposition to ancient Portuguese chapbooks, Brazilian brochures follow definite metric rules, as we have pointed out before. In Brazilian case, according to Amanda Muniz da Silva, the chapbook title should indicate the subject of the narration, such as, for instance, love, journalistic deeds, morality, without anticipating the plot itself. Lexical choice should be easy to understand. Rhymes should feature coherence between the words chosen, referring to the same theme.

Furthermore, another important element in terms of chapbooks is the woodcut drawing reproduction on the cover of the brochure. Henceforth, *Cordel* literature displays not only verbal elements, but also aesthetic values with the woodcut drawings. There has been, since the 19th century, an oscillation in terms of booklet shape and visual presentation, which has succeeded in conquering public acceptance for *Cordel*. Let us read a shrewd quotation from Jos éLuyten, a very well-known *Cordel* researcher in Brazil:

Cordel Literature has developed in an exponential way, mainly in the last hundred years—precisely because it is in this period that people could make use of press in Brazil. The great advantage of *Cordel* Literature over the newer expressions of popular literature is that the person of lower layers of society prints her production the way she understands it (our translation). (Luyten, 2017, p. 1)

The first chapbooks produced in Portuguese America, in the 16th and 17th centuries, were couched in verses of four poetic syllables. Five syllables (small round syllables) are more recent and their presence was not to be detected before the compositions of Firmino Teixeira do Amaral. In our view, this trend indicates the very powerful archaizing influx in Brazilian popular culture, specially in the Northeastern region of the country. Hilário Franco Júnior utters that many traditions on the brink of extinction in Europe could find a proper soil to flourish in America. This is the case of *Cordel*, *Cavalcadas*, and *Cheganças* and the myth of King Sebastian's return from his charmed island, emulating and updating the myth of King Arthur's return from Avalon. Actually, we can agree with Franco Júnior's propositions in terms of Brazil being endowed with medieval roots under a modern stem (Franco Júnior, 2008).



Figure 1. Some Cordel chapbooks in typical shape (https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/entretenimento/dia-do-cordelista-conheca-literatura-de-cordel-patrimonio-cultural-do-brasil/#google_vignette). Access: November 8th, 2025.



Figure 2. Woodcut reproduction on the chapbooks' cover (<https://brasilecola.uol.com.br/literatura/literatura-cordel.htm>). Access: November 8th, 2025.

The Medieval Background and Later Development

We come now to the core of significance of the *Cordel* literature in Brazilian popular culture. As we know from the argumentation above, the first *Cordel* chapbooks came to America in the 16th century with the Portuguese settlers and turned out to be a privileged means of communication in the newly founded Portuguese villages in America, principally in the Northeast, the main economic axis of colonization, with sugar, cocoa, cotton, or rice plantations.

Relying on the research of Professor Lu í da Câmara Cascudo, the first chapbooks in Portuguese America were the symbolic *locus* for the transmission of ancient medieval narratives, some of them being the poetic adaptation of elderly chivalric romances, such as the famous *Amadis de Gaula* from the 15th century, or even early modern chronicles, such as the *Chronicle of Emperor Clarimundo* (1520), by João de Barros, *Palmerin of England* (1567), by Francisco de Moraes, the *Memorial of the Prowesses of the Second Round Table* (1567), by Jorge Ferreira de Vasconcelos or, at last, *Diana* (1559) by Jorge de Montemor (Cascudo, 2006).

Besides, some Portuguese narratives from the Middle Ages were reproduced by chapbooks from the 16th century in Portuguese America, such as those referred to by Professor Júlia Constança Pereira Camelo: *The Story of Charlemagne and the Twelve Pears of France*, *The Story of Empress Porcina*, *Robert of the Devil*, *Lazarillo of Tormes*, the stanzas of Bandarra, *The Lineage Book of Prince Dom Pedro*, *The Story of Damsel Theodora*, and the *Story of Princess Magalona* (Camelo, 2014, pp. 27-28).

We should now like to quote Francisco Alves Marques and Esequiel Gomes da Silva:

Before reinventing itself in Brazilian Northeast, in the end of 19th century, chapbooks' literature, named Cordel, was already widespread throughout the world. In Italy, principally in the South, ambulant sellers, in a way close to mascots, used to wander selling brochures, the so-called *libretti muriccioli*, printed in thousands of copies soon after the newly-inaugurated printers in Naples were established. Printed on very ordinary paper sheets and at very low prices, they consisted in pieces of vulgarization of Ariosto, Tasso and even classical authors from Greek and Roman literature (our translation). (Marques & Silva, 2020, p. 21)

As a matter of fact, chapbooks in Portuguese America bore a kind of medieval view of the world, according to which the New World was a focus for the projection of medieval myths and hopes of the medieval imaginary, portraying America as the land of Paradise, filled with exotic creatures and persons dwelling on the edge of civilized world. One evidence of this symbolic process derives from the very name *Brazil*, which means "blessed island" in Gaelic (*Hy Brazil*). The Brazilian historian Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, in his great book *Vision of the Paradise* (1959), testifies that the first Portuguese, or European in general, sailors of 15th century's last year onwards, have identified the classical traits of Paradise in the part of South America to become Portuguese America and later Brazil (Hollanda, 1996, pp. 25-32).

In fact, European sailors and settlers contemplated ancient rhetoric *topoi* of the legendary Fortunate Islands and the Christian landmarks of Eden in Brazil Continent, such as everlasting spring time (*non ibi frigus, non ibi aestus*), the profusion of exotic, colourful fruits, trees and plants and, *last but not least*, innocent, pre-adamic people, evinced by nakedness, thus showing their sinless nature. This imaginary landscape matches the biblical tradition that, after the Fall of the First Man and Woman, the Hebraic patriarch Enoch and the Prophet Elijah have been granted the gift of returning to Eden after being tranced by God, without properly dying. In the plot of the *Fabliau de Cocagne* (beginning of the 13th century), Elijah and Enoch are depicted as dwelling in Eden, in turn considered to be less blessed than the land of Cockaigne.

Notwithstanding the fact that chapbooks' tradition has been active since colonial times, firstly as oral literature and getting printed in the 19th century, not every piece of *Cordel* was transposed to America. Mária Abreu has localized a crucial document for those wishing to investigate this subject. It is the *Catalogue for the Examination of the Books to Leave the Kingdom With Destination to Brazil*, which is kept in the Portuguese National Archive of Tombo Tower, in Lisbon (Abreu, 2011, p. 50). Besides, according to Amanda Muniz da Silva, the Portuguese colonos used to request books and chapbooks to the King and the most common booklets

sent to Brazil Continent are precisely the ones we have already cited in the text (Marques & Silva, 2020, pp. 43-44).

On the one hand, chapbooks written in Portuguese America initially exposed very long-term medieval traditions from Europe, yet, on the other hand, the production of Cordel in the colony has acquired very peculiar characteristics, such as the stories of brave oxen as protagonists in the plots. They unveiled fables with a strong connection with the economic base of the Northeastern hinterland, along with sugar plantation. It is precisely the cattle farms along Saint Francis river. At first, cattle were used as a driving force for the sugar farms. Nevertheless, as colonization penetrated the territory, cattle began being employed as meat source and for leather trade, which was later to become the vital element for the inner colonial commerce, unifying the distant and initially very detached regions of Portuguese America.

By the way, this effective consolidation of the Portuguese territory in America would only take place in the 18th century, as the mining of gold started linking leather, jerky beef, and transportation mules from the captaincy of São Pedro do Rio Grande do Sul to Minas Gerais, where the mining activities were concentrated. Mules were sold to the miners at the Fair of Sorocaba, in present-day São Paulo. The plantation economy in the Northeast furnished enslaved workers for the mining region, apart from selling primary products as sugar, cocoa, cotton, rice, tobacco, and others to the Metropolis.

As pieces of oral literature only to be couched in written brochures in the 19th century, Brazilian cordel plots were orally disseminated in colonial farms, public squares, small grocer's shops, and great social events as fairs and feasts. Some *cordel* composers used to disclose their creation in domestic ambiances, whilst some others dared to traverse the hinterland, exposing their own verses or those belonging to other poets. The diffusion used to take place in the form of poetic duels, as we have already addressed. The winner of this poetic competition was granted the right to utter more stanzas in his own apology, and thus declaimed his poetic superiority.

As the Mexican historian Lu í Weckmann lectures in *The Medieval Heritage of Brazil* (1993), Portuguese plantation farms in America were ordained in a rather medieval manner until the 17th century. For instance, there were warriors protecting the property, a rather medieval domestic life and the formation of a group of persons having a loyalty vow to the farm lord (*clientela*), as well as the feudal servants and vassals had a dependency linkage to the feudal lord. The only amusement, apart from religious celebrations, was the declamation of medieval adventures, mainly the story of *Charlemagne and the Twelve Pears of France* (Weckmann, 1993, pp. 44-45).

By and large, as we have already explored, the most favorite chapbooks told stories about humanized oxen, whose adventure was to flee away from the cowboys and finally be free. Márcia Abreu testifies that people from the Northeastern region felt happy and got identified with the oxen narratives, for their daily lives were marked by the characteristics of chapbooks' narratives. The most well-known were the ox chapbooks *Stream of Gererda*, a plot from the 17th century, *The Windhand Ox*, *Charming Ox*, *The Mysterious Horse*, *Surubim Ox*, *Barroso Ox*, *The Beast From the Joana Gomes Mountain Range*, and *Burel Cow* (Abreu, 2011, p. 80).

The narrative focus shuns the successive confrontation between persecutors and the oxen, until the moment when the ox passes away or is captured, normally described by the ox itself. Abreu believes that this sort of plot including oxen is a typical Brazilian creation, because it could not be traced back to Portuguese tradition or to the African heritage existing in the country.

Since the publication, by Leandro Gomes de Barros, in 1907, of his enormous work, until the 1930's, *Cordel* literature remained restrict to the Northeast of Brazil. In this epoch, relying on Júlia Camelo, poets used to print their pieces of work in little printing workshops called *folheterias*, like the Pontes Manufactory in Guarabira, Paraíba. This situation draws our attention to the fact that, even living in greater cities such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, many chapbooks' poets used to send their production to be printed in the traditional printing houses (*folheterias*) in the Northeast. This is the case, for instance, of the renowned chapbooks written by Apolônio dos Santos (Camelo, 2014, p. 29).

After the example of Leandro Gomes de Barros, a huge number of *cordel* poets made for greater cities and commenced to sell their chapbooks at home or in typical popular feasts. Chapbook writers used to read some verses aloud as to capture people's attention and awake their interest to the composition. When this sort of advertisement was brought about in the form of a duel, the audience used to intervene by means of protest and hoots.

In turn, Amanda Muniz da Silva points out that there were no definite features as to distinguish the authors of many chapbooks, for they mostly followed the metric rules that were usual in *Cordel* writing. In order to individualize their work, many composers attach a photograph to the back cover of the chapbooks (Silva, 2023, p. 42).

In terms of *cordel's* evolution in modern Brazil, a huge number of researchers listed by Professor Júlia Constança Camelo, such as José Luyten, Marlyse Maryer, and Cecília da Silva Azevedo, tend to conceive that there was a crisis in *cordel's* production in the 1960's, because of the expressive lack of chapbooks in the traditional Northeastern production area (Camelo, 2014). At first glance, this crisis is localized in a kind of gap between a golden era in *cordel's* production, the 1950's, and a period of new blossoming of the chapbook poetry and prose in big cities, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, specially in the newly founded Centres for Popular Culture.

Indeed, there was no real crisis in the 1960's, yet *Cordel* literature followed the migration of many Northeastern peasants who wrote chapbooks in the great urban centres, fleeing the huge draught which took place in their homeland. The Centres for Popular Culture, which have received *cordel* chapbooks in great fairs, were as well *think tanks* with the task of shaping a nationalist thought and culture, principally sponsored by the civil-military dictatorship in power at that time. In order to fulfill this purpose, Centres for Popular Culture laid emphasis on popular manifestations, like *cordel*, typical cuisine of the different Brazilian regions and, of course, football. Ironically, for all chapbooks' contents were set under censorship by the military rulers, *cordel* had its widest reach in terms of national context by then, and booklets could be acquired throughout the country.

As we can see below, with the powerful migration influx of Northeastern peasants, many of them being at the same time poets, great industrial centres such as São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro have witnessed the foundation of the so-called *Centros de Tradição Nordestina* ("Centres for Northeastern Traditions"), where *cordel* chapbooks are sold pending from strings, such as *folhas volantes* used to be disposed to sale in medieval Portugal. These centres for Northeastern traditions are great fairs where migrants can socialize and keep their cultural roots in the middle of very unpersonal metropolises. They also draw attention from non-migrants, eager to experience Northeastern traditions, specially the cuisine and, not on a smaller scale, typical dances, and *cordel* chapbooks on a wide range of subjects.



Figure 3. Chapbooks for sale in a traditional *Centro de Tradições Nordestinas* (<https://www.significados.com.br/literatura-de-cordel/>). Access on November 9th, 2025.

In present times, as Amanda Muniz da Silva lectures, *Cordel* literature has achieved the technical possibilities of creation and diffusion disposed by Internet. Actually, adaptation to different media has always a major feature of *Cordel* literature and nowadays one can find sites, blogs, homepages devoted to chapbooks, which, therefore, acquires a digital format (Silva, 2023, pp. 42-43). Nonetheless, the main characteristics of traditional *cordel* have remained, like the duty to inform, teach, and amuse the public, displaying woodcut paintings, verses couched in popular language, being easy to understand and portraying facts and figures of everyday life, ranging from politics, religious topics, to folkloric tenors.

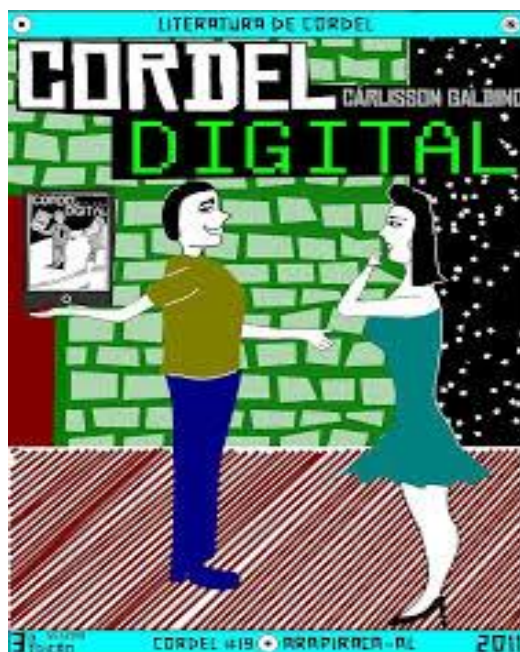


Figure 4. Digital *Cordel* homepage (<https://www.amazon.com.br/Cordel-Digital-C%C3%A1rliSSon-Galdino-ebook/dp/B07RH8LYLV>). Access on November 9th, 2025.

However, new technologies have not always supported the continuity of chapbooks' production, as it is the case that we should take television into account. Increasing the perception of a crisis in the 1960's, the

advent of television posed a challenge to *Cordel* literature, the soap opera. Let us quote Marques and Silva once again:

During the 1970's, until very recent times, *Cordel Literature*, in the persons of its poets, decides to face up its main threat, television, by means of a markedly moralizing bias, as an attempt to convince the readers that the insertion of T.V. in their homes would corrupt their families. In the beginning, both this communication means and its most consumed product, were not very well assimilated by Brazilian patriarchal society. Hinterland's people looked upon the T.V. device and its exhibition as an affront to patriarchal habits and morals (our translation). (Marques & Silva, 2020, p. 40)

Nowadays, *Cordel* literature enjoys a wide acceptance in multimedia environment, as the work of Zé do Cordel and Bráulio Bessa evince. Of course, digital world has begotten some changes in the chapbooks' conception in many aspects, such as the subject, style, metric composition, and so on and so forth. These metamorphoses were determined by the new ways people read and interact with virtual written language, as well as the shift in terms of topics and interests. For instance, the poetic production of Bráulio Bessa displays different subjects as human nature, regionalism, social classes, always including metaphors, rhymes, and repetitions. His principal means of divulgation are the Facebook and a T.V. program named GSHOW.

Final Considerations

We believe to have overseen the history and the charming mysteries of *Cordel* literature in Brazil. We conceive that *Cordel* survives in the country by dint of its very strong medieval tradition since the first centuries of European settlement. Actually, as we have approached in this text, *Cordel* has permanently showed the symbolic skill to get adapted to different contexts and epochs throughout Brazilian history.

Should we take into account all the features of *Cordel* literature, ranging from the traditional metric of round verses and sextillas (medieval heritage) to the vast set of topics and subjects dealt with, what could we tell about the nature of *Cordel* literature? What does it possess in its core that appears to decypher Brazilian popular culture?

We think that *cordel* chapbooks in Brazil, as well as they used to be in Europe during the Late Middle Ages, are a cultural translation of the ancient medieval stories and chivalric romances. Under such circumstances, *cordel* is a sort of remain of Brazil's very foundation, which was rather the upshot of a late medieval crusade than a modern, capitalist enterprise. Analysing this concept of cultural translation, the Indian historian Homi Bhabha avers, in *The location of culture* (2004), that, in cultural interaction, or in the moulding of interlarded cultures as those pertaining to the American Continent, there remains a piece of symbolic expression which cannot be transmuted, remaining faithful to its source, just like an ingredient unable to be dissolved within the resulting cultural broth (Bhabha, 2014).

By the way, in our decolonial times, it is appropriate to mention that this remaining cultural block not modified in the country's transculturation was appropriated by black and indigenous persons, which utters that this tradition pertains to the whole Brazilian people, not only white descendants of European settlers. Wherefore, exploring *Cordel's* mysteries throughout Brazilian History and attempting to understand its charm and plasticity are unveiling the sense and meaning underlying the Portuguese colonization in America and the ulterior Brazilian cultural stock.

As a matter of fact, just like the medieval interaction between orality and literacy, Brazilian chapbooks draw their thematic sap from what the Swiss researcher Paul Zumthor denominates primary orality, in *his The Letter and the Voice: On medieval "literature"* (1987). This means that orality begets the subjects that poets

will turn into written material. Being specially declaimed, rather than read individually, this content of mythical source gets back to orality, which is the secondary orality (Silva, 2023). This has been the secret of Cordel's lushness since the 16th century.

As a matter of fact, *Cordel* literature aids to explain the late-feudal transposition to Portuguese America and the fact that Brazilian popular culture has been engendered with a medieval heritage stock that should never be overseen or elided. Thereafter, this little and humble essay is our kind invitation for a further digging of the palimpsest of Brazilian medieval past and present cultural features.

References

- Abreu, M. (2011). *Histórias de cordões e folhetos*. Campinas: Mercado das Letras.
- Bhabha, H. (2014). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge Classics.
- Camelo, J. C. P. (2014). *O cordel e o migrante nordestino. Companheiros de viagem*. São Luís do Maranhão: Editora da UEMA.
- Cascudo, L. C. (2006). *Literatura oral no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Global.
- Cascudo, L. C. (2012). *Dicionário do folclore Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Editora Global.
- Eliade, M. (2005). *Mito e realidade*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva.
- Franco Júnior, H. (2008). As raízes medievais do Brasil. *Revista USP*, 78, 80-104. São Paulo, Brasil.
- Hollanda, S. B. (1996). *Visão do Paraíso*. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense.
- Luyten, J. M. (2017). *O que é literatura de cordel?* São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense.
- Marques, F. C. A., & Silva, E. G. (2020). A literatura de cordel Brasileira: Poesia, história e resistência. *Literatura de Cordel Contemporânea*. Campinas: Mercado das Letras.
- Schillot, P. (2018). *Littérature orale de la Haute Bretagne*. Paris: Forgotten Books.
- Silva, A. M. (2023). A trajetória da literatura de cordel no Brasil: Das feiras às mídias digitais. *Verbum*, 12(2), 6-31.
- Weckmann, L. (1993). *La herencia medieval de Brasil*. Ciudad de Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Zumthor, P. (1997). *La Lettre et la Voix: De la "Littérature" médiévale*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.