

## **Family in nineteenth century Brazil: examining the role of the patriarch in Minas Gerais Province.**

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the patriarchal family in nineteenth century Brazil. The historiography has shown that Brazil had an unusual household structure, with a large proportion of female breadwinners, reaching nearly 50% in some regions of the country. At the same time, there was a tradition of strong patriarchs holding the power in the household. In an attempt to understand the functioning of this apparently dual society, this work will present an analysis of the "Codigos Phillipinos" (colonial right codes), the Nominative Lists of Inhabitants, and nineteenth century travelers' reports. The study of these sources will allow a comparison between the legal norms and the social practices in this apparently contradictory society.

Brazilian historiography has presented the Family as a key institution in determining norms of behaviour and social relationships since colonial times. Nevertheless, until 1970s little research had developed in this area and the literature was dominated by the image of the patriarchal model established by Gilberto Freyre in his book, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, published in 1933. According to Freyre, the Brazilian family was characterized by extended families, including slaves, in which the breadwinner had the head post of the household. But, more than an economical power, the patriarch had the right to determine rules and behaviours. The household was under the primitive authority worship, the authority of the father, the patriarch, the head of the house. Freyre presented the patriarchal family as the common national unit, a kind of Brazilian root present in every part of the country. It is important to highlight that Freyre's patriarchal model was established on the basis of a case study of a specific elite group from Province of Pernambuco, northwest Brazil.

Until three decades ago, the patriarchal family model was used to understand and explain Brazilian social, political and familial characteristics throughout history time. With the development of demographic history, and its methods, in the 1970s, several studies regarding Brazilian family emerged, in which the subject of the

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omnipresence of the patriarchal family was discussed thoroughly. Several demographic-historians<sup>1</sup> presented, through empirical researches, a variety of household arrangements in several populations in the past. The verification of this diversity of arrangements was held through the adaptation of existent European typologies – the typology of Peter Laslett, in particular - which were adapted for Brazilian specificities, such as the presence of slaves.

Brazilian family historiography changed its perspective, highlighting the importance of local particularities in defining family structure. Localised research focusing urban centres of Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais Provinces discovered the existence of a large percentage of nuclear households led by women. For instance, Donald Ramos (1990), studying Vila Rica, Minas Gerais, in 1804, identified that 45% of all households were maintained by women. Dias, analyzing data from Vila de Sao Paulo, 1836, shows that 1/3 of all households were led by women. As a result of this new research, the Historiography incorporated the idea of multiple family models, and the existence of a modified patriarchal family system, especially in the southern region (SAMARA, 2002).

In an attempt to understand the role and the importance of the women into the household, and to detect the patriarchal culture, this paper will present a study of free families<sup>2</sup> in Province of Minas Gerais. Firstly, the idea of patriarchal will be discussed through the analyses of the *Códigos Filipinos* and nineteenth century travelers' reports. Secondly, it will be presented a quantitative analysis of the nominative lists of Minas Gerais Province, of 1831, showing the family structure emphasising the role of the woman head of household. That is an attempt to relate qualitative and quantitative information in order to a better understanding of the Population History.

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<sup>1</sup> See COSTA (1981), FREITAS (1985), MARCILIO (1972), METCALF (1982) and SAMARA (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Free Families are the ones in which the head has a free social condition.