

8.4 From defining *what elegance is to a youthful appearance: transformations in women's culture and fashion in the 70's*

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A b s t r a c t

This study analyzes the opinions given by specialists on elegance and good taste who featured in the social gossip columns of the daily newspapers in Brazil during the 1960s. In particular, there is an examination of Ibrahim Sued, the most well-known Brazilian columnist, and his contributions to the *O Globo* newspaper and the *Manchete* magazine. The purpose of this is to show how an appraisal of elegance and vulgarity (or poor taste) in reality plays a dual role by both adulating and propagating the lifestyle of the upper classes while at the same time, confining women to fulfilling their traditional roles of mother and housewife. These roles will be questioned later on through an examination of the cultural changes that accompany youth and the relations of young people with fashion and correct behavior.

Keywords: *Female behavior, Brazilian fashion, feminine elegance.*

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1. Introduction

Elegance is difficult to define, and it is exactly for this reason that it is manipulated by the well-known conventions of fashion and etiquette. As fashion is ephemeral, the standards of elegance tend to be constantly shifting and as a result, the need to be constantly up-to-date increases the importance of specialists and fashion stylists who are now becoming real arbiters of good taste.

For at least three decades in Brazil, this place was occupied by Ibrahim Sued, who wrote a daily column in the *O Globo*²⁰⁷ newspaper from 1954 until shortly before his death in 1995. As well as featuring in the paper, Sued also appeared in other media outlets such as the radio and television, as well as taking part every week in the popular Sunday documentary program called *Fantástico*. This column was aimed at the *gente bem* [well-off people] an expression attributed to Jacinto de Thormes²⁰⁸ who employed it to refer to the elite of the 1950s who went to parties, organized lavish dinners, spent their weekends at Petrópolis or Correias, were seen beside the swimming – pool of Copacabana Palace Hotel or went on trips to Paris.

Sued dominated the *grand monde* [high society] as he liked to call it and expressed his opinion about the art of receiving guests, and etiquette, as well as the elegance of the most important people of his time. However, the time most anticipated by his readers, was the month of December when the journalist published a list of the ten most elegant women of the year in both his *O Globo* column and the *Revista Manchete*²⁰⁹ magazine, complete with colored photos.

The purpose of analyzing the social chronicles of the period here is to explore a possibility that can reveal the behavior of the Brazilian elite of that period, because it can be presumed that these were used as models for other social classes to imitate.

Analyzing the handbooks on etiquette and good manners is a means of following the ideas of Norbert Elias (1994), who adopted them with the purpose of exploring the changes in sensibility with regard to the particular customs and habits of society and thus result in a civilize process. To this extent, the observations made in the handbooks can reveal the most radical social changes that can be found in Brazilian society in that period. What is noticeable is a lack of investigative inquiries into the inner daily lives of the young people, women and families in this recent historical period, which seem to be described in a somewhat artificial way in the social chronicles. However, they are illuminating when regarded as a kind of behavior that is being propagated to set an example. Back to that time can be seen in the attempts to capture the first signs of social change when young people became increasingly significant in numerical terms and of economic as consumers. Thus, this research seeks to reflect the mood of the time and describe the place of women and young people in society, as well as the role attributed to families. These three key players – women, young people and the family – will be the target of extreme changes in terms of the roles and behavior witnessed in the youth rebellion of the 1960s. The questions of changes still remained in the following decades and led to more significant social changes in the 1980s when women and young people finally began to play a more prominent role in the job market, even at the expense of other age groups (Silva, 2011).

It may seem impossible to portray any event of the 1960s without referring to the impact that youth culture had on society as a whole. However, when the social gossip columns of the 1950s and 1960s are examined, there are number

207 *O Globo* is one of the newspapers in Brazil that has the widest circulation and forms a part of a conglomerate with the same name, which also includes the Rede Globo [Globo Network] the largest broadcaster and radio transmitter in Brazil, as well as being a publisher of books and magazines.

208 Pseudonym of Manuel Antonio Bernardez Muller, or Maneco Muller, the pioneer of the art of writing social columns in Brazil.

209 It was the question of a varied weekly magazine which circulated in the country between 1952 and 2000, only to disappear when its editor went into decline. It was characterized by a large format that was full of colored photographs of political celebrities or the artistic milieu.

of nuances that separate the generations at that time, in particular the signs of conservatism among the Brazilian elite that reflect a French culture similar to that of the *ancien régime*.

2. Everything is known in society²¹⁰

It has often been said that during the colonial period in Brazil, the Court and the elite that lived here, followed European fashions, principally French which they found in Rua do Ouvidor [Ouvidor Street] in Rio de Janeiro, or purchased directly in Paris. Much later on, in the 20th Century, women who belonged to the elite were well-known clients of the most renowned French costume-designers such as Eufrásia Teixeira Leite, Tarsila do Amaral, who dressed with Poiret or Jean Patou or Yolanda Penteadó (Bivar, 2004), who describes her visits to Madame Grès in her biography.

In fact, the French influence on the culture of the Brazilian elite was not a particular national feature because since the 18th Century, France has influenced other European countries in questions of fashion, etiquette and life-style (Elias, 2001). Thus, the inhabitants of the tropics who dressed in accordance with the restrictive dictates of European fashion in the 19th Century, were not simply imitating a frivolous kind of elegance but conforming to the required standards of decency and civility. As well as this, they were strengthening their marks of social distinction, and openly differentiating themselves from the *negro* slaves or former slaves and indigenous.

By the 20th Century, the elite which had profited from coffee farming, was spending long periods of time in Europe, particularly in Paris, which led to the continuity of this influence, as well as items being brought back to Brazil, such as clothes, household objects, works of art, habits, new words and expressions, and cooking recipes. In reality, the French fashion industry remained supreme throughout the world during the first half of the 20th Century but the cosmopolitanism of the city in this period also helped to give Paris a higher. After the First World War, with the presence of demobilized American *negro* soldiers who remained in Europe, some of the Bohemian districts witnessed the appearance of jazz music. During the 1920s other Americans arrived: writers, aspiring writers, intellectuals and other artists who were attracted to the festive life-style of the city and could live a comfortable life owing to the difference in the exchange rate between the dollar and the French franc which had depreciated after the war. It became common for these people to make transatlantic voyages²¹¹.

However, although this small wealthy elite that travelled and enjoyed the pleasures of cosmopolitan Paris, behaved in a more liberal and bohemian way, this was restricted to their visits to the old continent. In their own country they remained inhibited by moral questions and traditional customs, especially with regard to women.

The period from 1950 to 1960 was generally one of affluence in which industrial progress gave the middle-classes access to the kind of consumer goods that had previously been reserved for the upper classes. This was the case in Western Europe and the United States but also in Brazil for a restricted section of society who lived in the urban areas of the south and south-east of the country. It was because the new middle-classes were becoming affluent that it was important for them to pay heed to the traditional forms of social distinction. The strict adherence to etiquette and the definitions of elegance

²¹⁰The title of the book compiled by Isabel Sued, daughter of Ibrahim, who brought together extracts from his chronicles and books. Published by Editora Rocco in 2001, the book is divided into different decades and within each of these, deals with general subjects like, politics, important people, fashion, etc. However, the work has limited value as a source of research because it isolates the extracts that are regarded as interesting from the context of the chronicle and fails to provide specific dates.

²¹¹Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway (2012) were among the American writers who lived in Paris at that time and they portrayed the life-style of the Americans and other intellectuals and foreign artists who lived in the city

would have to be remembered so as to separate newly acquired wealth from the old. Moreover, luxury would have to find new kinds of expression, usually through the exclusive world reserved for members of the group.

The gossip columns of the *O Globo* newspaper show a period in which even when Rio de Janeiro ceased to be the capital of the Republic²¹², it retained its influence and was a place of great political and economic importance, as well as being the first (and often the only) destination of the stars and other international celebrities who visited Brazil. As seen from today, the world of this elite seems like the meeting of a small and select group in the same places. Everybody knew each other and had the impression that everything of importance in the country took place in Rio de Janeiro, because the economic expression of São Paulo had still not superseded the “wonderful city” in terms of social prestige.

2.1. The world of the social columnist and Ibrahim Sued

The underlying prescriptive tone that mixed behavior and clothing making them the ideal combination of elegance (or inelegance) can be seen in several texts about fashion: newspaper and magazine editorials, reader’s letter sections, and articles, among others. Appearing in a social column; however, seemed to be the most prestigious form of judgement since it created a hierarchy between the “elegant” ones and the “social column material.”

Ibrahim Sued came from a poor family of Arab immigrants and did not have enough cultural or financial capital to enter the world of journalism of what was then the capital of the country. However, he managed to acquire fame, wealth and respectability as an arbiter of good taste and good living. One peculiar feature of the journalist was that he was notorious for his errors of grammatical agreement and other blunders in Portuguese. However, his grammatical difficulties were turned into a personal style and he was authorized to publish the chronicles without any revision by the *O Globo* newspaper with the slogan “*Please forget Camões. It’s forbidden to mix him up with my style. Thanks*” (Sued, 2001).

Although the style of the kind of chronicle invented by Ibrahim Sued aroused considerable interest in the communication field, this was not the main objective of his work²¹³. The columns of the journalist are taken here as a particular kind of reporting on the social life of the period in which the behavior and life-style of the Brazilian elite can be identified. In addition, the list of ten most elegant women drawn up by Ibrahim can provide a clear picture of the patterns of self-control in the society of that period, which was about to undergo radical changes. Hence, they serve here as a daily memory of appearances because they convey the ideas and images of a public performance of himself.

In the representative newspapers of the two important capitals of that time (*Folha de São Paulo* and *O Globo*), the social gossip column was something addressed to a small group of readers – basically speaking, those who took part in the events described. Thus, birthdays, baptisms, engagements, weddings, dinner parties and other ceremonial occasions are narrated and portrayed so that they can be shared by other people in the same social milieu. The fact that, in the course of time, the paper had acquired a larger readership than what was being portrayed, did not alter the content of the gossip columns. It still recounted in minute detail like the news story devoted to the 15th birthday of the daughter of an industrial magnate, while also giving a lengthy

²¹² Rio de Janeiro was the capital of Brazil until 1960, when the building of Brasília was completed, and the capital was transferred to the center of the country.

²¹³ This same factor is addressed in the work of Isabel Travancas.

description of the clothes worn by the hostess and most illustrious guests, often accompanied by photographs. The purpose of this kind of news seems, at that time, to have been to praise the social distinction of those who featured in these columns.

The new phenomenon introduced by Ibrahim Sued was that he did not appear in the events as an observer or as the reporter he often was, but as an actor and as someone who took part in the activities and gave an account of his own adventures. In contrast with other journalist of his milieu, who made a point of extolling those whom they portrayed, Ibrahim, in the course of time, established his own prestige and featured alongside the personalities from the world of politics, economics, and the artistic and high society. By appearing beside personalities like Queen Elizabeth of England, his position was consolidated as an arbiter of elegance and of unquestionable good taste. Ibrahim Sued regarded himself as a member of a group who narrated his everyday life to the readers.

In the period under study, for those who belonged to the international Jet set to be in the right condition to "frequent" the gossip columns because the same people could be found on both sides of the Atlantic and travel to Europe, in particular Paris. It should be borne in mind that at this time, there was a mismatch between the large cities and small towns in the world. Thus, a news in terms of fashion, music and cinema occurred in London, Paris or New York, was only known in other parts of the world after a delay of several months or even years. This meant that the members of the Jet set were the people who were most up-to-date in terms of setting international trends. The Jet set basically consisted of the heirs of Americans, Europeans and some Latin-Americans, as well as artists from the cinema or music, some businessmen and other celebrities and its members circulated between the most important European cities, New York and at times, Rio de Janeiro. As well as trips to Paris, other practices of this life-style included summer holidays on the Côte d'Azur or in Capri, cruises in the Mediterranean and winters skiing in Switzerland. As a result, the members of the group spoke several languages at the same time and mixed up French, English and Italian. (Dorléans, 2009).

This mixture of languages and expressions which never knew any connection to Portuguese, was not an exclusive feature of Ibrahim Sued. All the social chronicles are written in a style that abuses terms in French. Being aware that his scope went well beyond of this group, Ibrahim sometimes translated these expressions or explained the meaning of particular things, the names of wines or French dishes served at the dinners in which he took part. This fact also betrayed him, being regarded as an outside member and made his readers more aware of the exclusive nature of this life-style.

2.2. The elegance of Brazilian women in the golden years

The women who appeared in the lists prepared by Ibrahim Sued of the most elegant of the year, followed a definite pattern or as the journalist stated, "criterion of elegance". According to Sued, this criterion is simplicity. "Elegance cannot be purchased", as the author also said with regard to the lists in question. However, all the women selected dressed in full-length French gowns, paid visits to Paris and many belonged to the Jet set. Naturally, there were more than ten wealthy women, dressed in European fashions who frequented the high society of that time, and some only remained out of the list because they

failed to follow the requirement of “simple elegance”. In the 1960s, young and single women began to feature in the list, which had not been the case before, when it only featured married women.

Since Rio de Janeiro was the capital of the Republic, naturally politics carried a good deal of weight in the social life of the city and the wives of diplomats, ambassadors and deputies were given prominence because they had a greater opportunity to shine on the formal occasions in which they took part. These were followed by the wives of leading businessmen: bankers, industrialists, lawyers, and the other traditional heirs of Rio. Some names appeared regularly in that period and were mentioned several times not only for this column, their names appear in the lists that were drawn up for the various social columns. These included Lourdes Catão, Teresa de Souza Campos, Carmen Mayrink Veiga and Elisinha Moreira Salles, who also achieved international fame in terms of elegance. Elisinha Moreira Salles, who was also known as a leading hostess, was the wife of the banker Walter Moreira Salles, and organized numerous receptions at her house in Gávea, where she invited both the Brazilian and international elite.

In the publication of the list, one page which includes some names and photographs provides details of their personal life, tastes in terms of fashion and the reasons for their elegance. With regard to fashion, the preferences of those chosen for 1968 are as follows: Balmain, Dior, Grès and Valentino (O Globo, 1968, p. 2). If it is remembered that the famous designers of that age were André Courrèges, Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Cardin, it can be seen that a traditional style remained in the kind of elegance celebrated in these columns. What still appears here as a model of elegance is a kind of conformity to a role that was already being openly questioned by the new generations:

The ‘67 woman’. First and foremost, the ‘67 woman’ [in reference to the year] must please men. Pleasing other women or friends is a waste of time... It is stupid.

Be discreet, that is, feminine: no reference to masculinity, such as those ludicrous pantsuits, which look good on women not interested in men.

Speaking loudly and laughing uncontrollably are among the things men hate the most. I, for example, absolutely loathe it...

Women wearing a lot of perfume are also awful!

If a woman wants to be elegant, I’m talking about ‘the 67 woman’, she has to be what we – men – expect her to be: classy. And you don’t need a date to be classy... That’s what I think. (Sued, 2001, p. 139).

It is clear from this extract that there was a need for elegant women to conform to a determined role and place: that of a discreet and docile housewife

who does not draw attention to herself. In her traditional task of alluring men, she must seek to cater to his wishes. Even the latest fashion which already included slacks and female suits, symbols of independence and the new roles of women, are rejected by Sued, who stresses the need for women to be "feminine" and praises the social roles of different genders through clothing (Crane, 2006).

On another occasion, also in the 1960s, his criticism is more direct, and he makes obvious the "macho" cultural influences that prevailed in the Brazilian society of that time:

To husbands – If you arrive home, and your wife is having a tantrum, don't attach any importance to it. Remember that the poor thing has spent the entire day gossiping with her friends. If your wife is wearing a mini-skirt contrary to your wishes, forgive her because she needs to show off her legs. If your wife doesn't want to go to the cinema, don't argue with her because she has certainly been out with her friends all afternoon. If the food isn't up to your taste, don't get angry with your poor little wife because of course she has spent the day chatting with her friends and hasn't had time to give the servants any orders. When your wife is annoyed, don't blame her: remember that you have spent the entire day working like a slave to support your family. If she complains that you only give her a little money, raid a bank because your wife is the 'most ...' (Sued, 2001, p. 97).

The extract above makes clear the difficulties of recognizing a woman as an individual who does not only live to please her husband, and this explains the sarcastic tone which praises her supposed idleness and carefree nonchalance.

Brazil, which in the second half of the 1960s lived under a military dictatorship, attempted to champion family values and marriage through various spokesmen. At the same time, it was impossible to stem the tide of cultural changes which followed in the wake of the Second World War, through a cultural industry involving the cinema, music and television, even though many works were subject to censorship. It was undeniable that young people and women enjoyed more freedom in several Western countries. To some extent, Brazilian society had contact with these changes, either through travelling overseas or through the films that arrived here. Thus, the adulation of the role of the housewife confined to the home and eager to serve the interests of her husband, was in complete conflict with what was taking place in the outside world at that time.

At the same time, the praise for elegance and good taste through a predilection for the kinds of clothes sold in the shops of the French designers, together with the snobbery of the Brazilian elite who asserted the distinction of their social class (Bourdieu, 2004), also prevented a Brazilian fashion industry from making headway. As already mentioned, at the end of the 19th Century, the country already had a trade in luxury goods which supplied the middle and upper classes with imported products and a few items of high quality

manufactured in Brazil (Bonadio, 2007). The textile industry was thriving in several Brazilian towns but did not produce fabrics of a sufficiently high quality to compete with the imported goods and the companies thus concentrated on manufacturing cheaper garments for the poorest sections of society. For this reason, the manufacturers earned a reputation for providing clothes of a poor quality and these were marketed at a price that could be afforded for the working classes. (Maleronka, 2007). Those who had more money to spend on clothes turned to the fashion designers or stores for made-to-measure clothes, which in most cases were copies of European designs.

Bonadio (2014) states that around 1960, the textile industry began to depend on an expansion of local manufacturers to leverage a greater volume of products. As a result, it was necessary for the fashionable goods produced nationally, to break the class barrier and also begin to cater for the needs of the middle and upper classes. The industry invested a good deal of money in advertising to achieve this, as well as inviting recognized artists to create clothes that could highlight the national character of the production. Although these campaigns were very successful in terms of publicity, the prejudices with regard to national fashion products were not so easy to overcome.

2.3. The fashion of youth, the world of youth

The Cultural Revolution among the young at the end of the 1960s, is sufficiently well known as to need no explanation here. However, in Brazil, it coincided with the years of greatest resistance to the military government, after the issuing of the decree “*Ato Institucional n° 5*”²¹⁴, [Institutional Act Number Five], when there was a demonstration of students and young people in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, as well as some groups who were involved in clandestine and armed action to combat the regime.

Although some people in Brazilian society welcomed the sudden changes in the country which rapidly became industrialized and urbanized, albeit in a haphazard and incomplete manner, the student resistance movement suffered violent repression at the hands of the military government and many people were imprisoned, tortured or sent into exile. For this reason, the 1970s were a time of appeasement and selfish individualism on account of the prevailing climate of fear, with more localized forms of resistance in the fields of “symbolic production” such as art and poetry.

It was also at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, that a more identifiable national fashion began to emerge through the activities of small businessmen who were established in the district of Ipanema, in Rio de Janeiro. Whether because of the political climate or not, most of these people were young and produced clothes for other young people like themselves. At the same time, European fashion which always served as a benchmark for the Brazilian elite, had undergone significant changes in the post-war period. It now gave limited space to haute couture and concentrated more on *ready-to-wear* garments which made them more accessible to the middle-classes who wanted clothes of a higher quality and more sophisticated design.

According to Lipovetsky (1999), elegance is ceasing to be a sign that one belongs to a particular social class and becoming an expression of freedom in itself, more individualistic and hedonistic styles and the outcome of youth culture being able to penetrate Western societies. Moreover, this new fashion glorify youth itself and encouraging the principle of endowing beauty and

²¹⁴Known as AI-5, this presidential decree was issued in December, 1968 and suspended the constitutional rights, as well as the parliamentary seats of all those who were opposed to the military regime. The forms of persecution inflicted on the opposition became harsher and included the torture of political prisoners as an institutional means of obtaining information and quelling resistance.

elegance with the spirit of youth. As Rainho (2014) makes clear, youth fashion treats the young body as the model to be followed. This means that elegance shifts from the garment to the body and can be judged in the same way for all age groups.

Thus, it can be seen that it was only at the end of the 1960s when elegance was transferred from the quality of garments and dressing, to the behavior of the young, that Brazilian fashion began to make inroads into the middle and upper classes. This was because this fashion also evolved by laying emphasis on a lifestyle that had previously been regarded as undesirable: the sunburnt and healthy body being displayed on the beach or in a natural setting. The benchmarks for elegance had previously been linked to standards that could be described as anti-modern and ignored the autonomy of women in a Western urban society.

3. *Final considerations*

By conducting an analysis of women's features in the press which associates fashion with patterns of behavior, it is possible to follow a path which shows the strict conventions that require women to conform to certain roles: those of the virtuous and discreet housewife, the impeccable hostess, and someone devoted to her husband's career.

Hence, fashion and the ideas of elegance celebrated in the social gossip columns, convey a model of womanhood that is passive and traditional with a number of female attributes (waist, bust and hips) that are well defined. This stylistic feminine construction was already being widely challenged in the creations of the fashion designers of that time.

On the other hand, it can be shown that this is a world that agonizes even when it is experiencing its last moments of glory. The economic and cultural changes that broadened the consumerism of the middle-classes during the 1950s (Hobsbawm, 1995), also had serious implications for the culture and life-style of the elite, including with regard to the increasing influence that North-American culture began to exert on Western societies. And even Paris was undergoing a change, although it had retained its prestige in terms of haute couture. New productive centers began to compete with it, together with the proliferation of life-styles that were characterized by a greater degree of hedonism.

Fashion and elegance remained for a long time as the means of determining the place of women and imprisoning her by confining her role to someone expected to adorn a patriarchal society. The existence of "arbiters of elegance", beauty contests and other types of competition based on appearance, are thus in reality only attempts to obtain social control over women.

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