

Elite da Liberdade: a contribution to the history of black clubs in Brazil

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Abstract

This article investigates the trajectory of the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade (the Liberdade Elite Guild of Drama, Recreation, and Literature), a black club active in São Paulo, Brazil, from 1919 to 1927. The aim is to reconstruct aspects of the club's history in light of its educational discourse on civility, which was used as a strategy to promote modern virtues in the black milieu. By appropriating the precepts of civility, Elite da Liberdade helped construct a positive black identity, enabled the creation of bonds of solidarity among its members, and made itself a place of resistance and struggle for social inclusion, recognition, and citizens' rights.

Resumo

O artigo investiga a trajetória do Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade, um clube negro da cidade de São Paulo, Brasil, no período de 1919 a 1927. O intuito é reconstruir aspectos da história do clube à luz de seus discursos pedagógicos de civilidade, que foram acionados como estratégia para promover as virtudes modernas no meio negro. Apropriando-se dos preceitos de civilidade, o Elite da Liberdade contribuiu para a construção de uma identidade negra positivada, possibilitou a criação de laços de solidariedade entre seus sócios e se constituiu como local de resistência e luta por inserção social, reconhecimento e cidadania.

I have an association that is mine: my people, my folk
José Correia Leite

One Sunday afternoon in São Paulo, in the early 1920s, a young man named José Correia Leite entered a social club for the very first time. One of the future leaders of Brazil's black milieu, he paid that visit to Duque de La Bruse, a recreational association for immigrants on Rua Glicério, at the behest of Italian friends after a good deal of speculation about whether he would be admitted. The ban on blacks in immigrants' social clubs, which were proliferating in São Paulo's state capital at the time, was strict and extended to the city's elite clubs, as well as cafés, plazas, theatres, and many other venues, because the young Republic's principles of liberty, formal equality, and rights were not fully guaranteed to the black population. Instead, they were marginalized: politically, due to limited suffrage and other barriers to political-institutionalized participation; socially and psychologically, in the face of the doctrines of scientific racism and the "theory of whitening"; and economically, due to job discrimination by employers who preferred to hire European immigrant labour (Andrews, 1991, p.32).

Although Correia Leite said he felt uncomfortable at the Duque de La Bruse, he stayed on until the end of the day's entertainment. When it was over, and the Italians were leaving the club's lounge, some "very well dressed" black girls, "dapper Negroes," an orchestra and the board of the Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade (Elite Flower of Liberdade Ladies' Guild) began to arrive for a dance that was scheduled to begin at 3 pm (Leite, 1992, p.27). Mainly run by women, the association, which had existed since at least 1919 (*ibid.*), was one of several black clubs that appeared in the city of São Paulo in the first decades of the twentieth century, organizing a range of activities such as parties (especially dances), games, picnics, theatrical performances, literacy classes, lectures, and celebrations, marking significant historical dates for the black community. Some of them also published periodicals, retrospectively called "newspapers of the black press" (Bastide, 1973; Ferrara, 1985; Butler, 1998; Domingues, 2008; Alberto, 2011).

According to Peter Burke, clubs – institutions that fall midway between the private and the public worlds – contribute to the organization of civil society and enable the creation of bonds of solidarity and fraternity among their members (Burke, 2009, pp.200-202). In São Paulo's black milieu, those institutions were founded by "men of color" who, "aware of the racism practiced by white clubs, decided to invest their energy, time and will in building their own spaces to enliven the social activities of the black community," spaces in which they could experience aspects of public life that were forbidden to them in other clubs in the

city and build sociability without the limitations of “color prejudice” (Domingues, 2009, p.1). This amazed Correia Leite, for whom it was his first contact with the “*meio negro*.”¹ Intrigued, he looked around to see if there was anyone there that he knew and it was then that he came across Manoelzinho, a childhood friend who was “like a foster brother”. Manoelzinho introduced Correia Leite to the other club members and guests. Correia Leite then thought to himself, “I’m wasting my time with these Italians. I have an association that is mine: my people, my folk” (Leite, 1992, p.27).

Black clubs invested in educational discourse about the construction of their members’ ways of being and living. Possibly influenced by the “civility manuals” then in vogue, their leaders sought to regulate social comportment, prescribing models and condemning behavior considered “inappropriate”. In *The Civilizing Process*, sociologist Norbert Elias (1994) analyzed the so-called civility literature: works produced and disseminated mainly in France, the Netherlands, and Germany during the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. According to Elias, these societies experienced markedly more complex relations between diverse groups and needed “a common language and new points of reference on how to behave socially”. As Elias observes, “civility manuals” were signs of refinement and hierarchy among individuals, determining how to be civilized, polite, educated: “The intensive elaboration of etiquette, ceremony, taste, dress and even conversation had the same function. Every detail here was an ever-ready instrument in the prestige struggle and this elaboration served not only for demonstrative display...it also created graduated internal distances” (Elias, 1987, p.86).

Historian Jacques Revel has also analyzed the civility literature, emphasizing that these works codified and regulated social behavior for everyday life in society and proclaimed that physical signs – gestures, mimicry, postures – constituted legible expressions of one’s concept of the world and life, beliefs, and values. For Revel, by regulating the gestures and signs of the body, civility manuals intended to train and reform modern citizens. Thus, “gestures and actions that could pull humanity out of itself and drag it into animality” would be banned, such as “equine laughter and a nasal voice that resembles an elephant” (Revel, 1991, pp.172-175). In any case, civilities would endure well beyond the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era, with adaptations and renewed practices that resonated in the black clubs.

If those clubs were influenced by the “modern” lifestyle of the middle class and the elites, who needed models of behavior in order to live together in society and appropriated

¹ The expression “*meio negro*” (translated here as “black milieu”) appears in the statements of José Correia Leite on several occasions when the activist refers to members of the black press, to regulars and members of clubs, guilds and other black associations in São Paulo during the First Republic. Everything indicates that the recurrence of this term in the studies of Florestan Fernandes and Roger Bastide is due to José Correia Leite’s contributions to their research. Regarding the “black milieu” and the trajectory of José Correia Leite, see: Leite, 1992.

the French model of civility (Siqueira, 2009), the black clubs sought to (re)educate the “race” to combat stereotypes (indolence, apathy, vagrancy, criminality, intellectual incapacity, amorality, debauchery, etc.) that relegated the black population to a subaltern position. Moreover, these stereotypes were propagated by the racist theories that circulated within high and popular culture (Schwarcz, 1993). It was probably for that purpose, to (re)educate the black community, that the “race’s” clubs evoked civility to regulate their members’ social behavior and make it positive.

Learning about the operations, structure, and organization of these clubs is therefore important for understanding the conditions in which at least part of the Afro-Brazilian population sought to assert itself subjectively in terms of citizens’ rights in the post-abolitionist period: these clubs were an intrinsic part of the struggle for identity affirmation, which they are sometimes conflated with (Pinto, 2013, p.64). This article investigates the history of one of those clubs, the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade (Elite of Liberdade Dramatic, Recreational and Literary Guild), during the period when it was in operation, from 1919 to 1927. Through José Correia Leite’s statements and newspapers, both the black and general press, we seek to reconstruct the trajectory of this association in light of its educational discourse, understanding how prescriptions of civility were a strategy for promoting modern virtues in the black milieu, which would enable that segment of the population not only to master the codes of urban sociability but to achieve social inclusion, recognition, and civil rights.

Race, civility and citizens’ rights

The Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade was apparently founded in October 1923,² after splitting from Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade. Located in the Liberdade district, in central São Paulo City, since its inception, the latter of the two clubs had been frequented by Alfredo Eugenio da Silva, who is considered the mentor of Elite da Liberdade and was known as “Alfredinho.” However, his relationship with the women’s club was unclear. In July 1919, the newspaper *A Liberdade* reported a visit by Alfredinho to Elite Flor da Liberdade with mock astonishment: “we have heard it said: ... That Alfredinho has attended Elite’s rehearsals. Oh! (*A Liberdade*, July 14, 1919, p.2)”. The following year, it seems the guild went through a period of inactivity, as it was reopened by Alfredinho under a different name some time later: “Elite is reborn! Glory to Alfredinho! your passion is satisfied! here we have a new Elite, with a new organization” (*A Liberdade*, April 4, 1920, p.2). However, in August 1921, Alfredinho severed relations with Elite Flor da Liberdade (*O Alfinete*, August 28, 1921, p.2), despite having re-established it in October

² We have not found any sources that confirm the date the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade was founded. However, the guild celebrated its anniversary in October.

of the same year, when he proposed changes to the recreational association: “Alfredinho, despite being a bit cranky with the people of the beautiful association on Rua Tamandaré, has made immense efforts to make it worthy of that name – Elite – for which purpose he put together a Board of – handsome boys” (*O Alfinete*, October 30, 1921, pp.2-3).

Thus, in the black press, Alfredo Eugenio da Silva is associated with the Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade through ironic commentary and reports of disagreements, which suggests that his relationship with that club was ambivalent. José Carlos Gomes da Silva observes that black people associated with social clubs and the black press were not a monolith, which led to disagreements, disputes, and conflicts among their members which arose from different political-ideological projects and, at times, led to divisions within the group or its associations (Silva, 1990, p.146). Several black clubs emerged through splits with others. This was the case with the Grêmio Dramático e Recreativo Kosmos (Kosmos Dramatic and Recreational Guild), which broke away from the Grêmio Dramático 18 de Agosto (August 18th Dramatic Guild), and the Clube 28 de Setembro (September 28th Club), which split from the Clube 13 de Maio (May 13th Club). We believe that the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade was founded by at least one dissident member of the Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade: Alfredo Eugênio da Silva.

An employee of the Recebedoria de Rendas (income tax collection bureau), before establishing Elite da Liberdade, da Silva was a member of the José do Patrocínio Society (*O Kosmos*, November 16, 1924, p.4), which was based in the state capital and published a newspaper to which Alfredinho also contributed (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, pp.1-2). After the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade was founded, his name was always associated with the guild, although it also appeared in the membership lists of other clubs. He was even described as the individual “solely responsible” for the guild (*O Kosmos*, October 19, 1924, p.3). This may be a reference to the fact that Alfredinho was the only president of the club throughout its existence.

Like other black associations active during the First Republic (1889-1930), the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade had a constitution that set forth its purposes, organizational regulations, and rules of operation, such as the events it should hold, the rights and duties of its members, and the rules for their admission and dismissal, as well as to ensure their attendance. The guild did not have its own fixed headquarters. It was initially located on Rua dos Estudante nº 14 (*Elite*, January 20, 1924, p.1), then moved to Rua 25 de Março nº 63 (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.3) and subsequently to Rua Carmo nº 26 (*O Clarim d’Alvorada*, September 27, 1925, p.26). These moves indicate a geographic shift towards the city centre, a strategic location for attracting new members (Silva, 1990, p.102).

Despite the adjective “dramático”, which in this context meant putting on plays, we have not found any mention of theatrical activities within the guild. As for its literary side,

Elite da Liberdade produced a monthly publication, *Elite*, between 1923 and 1924. However, most of the activities organized by the club and publicized in the black press were recreational: celebrations, balls, festivals, and dance matinees (Lucindo, 2016). Regina Pahim Pinto asserts that in São Paulo's "black milieu" at that time, most clubs were recreational, and "dances were the most publicized social activities" (Pinto, 2013, p.83). Undoubtedly, dances were popular because they brought together a range of social agents and, as Petrônio Domingues points out, from the perspective of Afro-Paulistas, dances took on several meanings and connotations: for young, single people, they were an opportunity to meet with and make friends, and for flirtations; for black activists, dances were a favorable environment for exchanging experiences and discussing problems related to racial issues; for a few small businessmen, it was a potentially profitable venture, depending on the profits of the bar, box office etc. These dances were, above all, a place for sociability, identity construction, entertainment, and "fun, whether to ease the hardships of life or to celebrate achievements" (Domingues, 2009, p.5). A columnist for *Elite* described dances as being, "among all the amusements," those which most "provide true pleasures," capable of making people "forget the miseries of life" and making "thorny paths flowery" (*Elite*, 17 February 1924, p.1).

However, as Peter Burke argues, "Clubs are exclusive by definition, as they are voluntary associations that have the right to reject as well as admit new members" (Burke, 2009, p. 199). This characteristic of social clubs requires that candidates for membership must have certain prerequisites to be accepted by those associations. What were the prerequisites for being accepted as a member of Elite da Liberdade or even taking part in its activities? Could any member of the black community attend the club? In the invitation to a festival held by Elite da Liberdade on February 23, 1924, the board made the caveat that "gentlemen and ladies [who] appear in costume may participate, although the Board reserves the right to bar 'this or that [man or woman]' who is not [considered] suited to the social milieu" (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.3).

The conditions imposed by the club show that not just anyone could attend its festivities. They had to be "suited to the social milieu," which means that the individual had to assimilate the values of civility, understood as a pedagogy of behavior. In other words, the individual had to follow the canons of good manners and comportment, internalize the rules of etiquette, and adopt the ethical precepts for shaping good citizens.

The black clubs' representatives were concerned with bodily expressions in social spaces, which could compromise the individual's status and, in the case of the black community, could subject them to the stigmas of inferiority. For this reason, the narratives cover taking care of one's personal appearance and attire, which were considered an important part of social intercourse. And there is more. As historian Leo Spitzer observes,

the adoption of formal attire among black people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dressing elegantly and adopting European fashions, were key factors for their social inclusion and mobility (Spitzer, 2001). Thus, clothing emerged as one of the main symbols of distinction (Bourdieu, 2007) in the black milieu, which is why, in public events, people in that segment of the community sought to be “well dressed” (Silva, 1990, p.108).

In reports about dances held by black guilds and clubs, people’s clothing was always an aspect to be evaluated. The ceremonial attire of the ladies and gentlemen of Elite da Liberdade was praised, for example, by the newspaper *O Kosmos*, when it reported that, on the occasion of a guild ceremony, “in their beautiful toilette-, they lent the festivities the greatest brilliance” (*Kosmos*, November 16, 1924, p.4). If an individual was scruffily dressed, they underwent public policing. In one episode, it was the president of Elite da Liberdade himself who became the target of such policing. In its gossip column, *Kosmos* reports in a humorous and sarcastic tone that “Alfredinho’s coat looks like a dog with scabies. Go and buy another one. Something like Frederico’s” (*O Kosmos*, December 21, 1925, p.2).

As Norbert Elias argues, in the nineteenth century social injunctions and prohibitions increasingly became part of the individual, who was urged to show self-control in order to be self-disciplined about bodily expressions – gestures, posture, appearance (Elias, 1987). Club representatives recommended that their members not only show vigilance, restraint, and self-control in their dress but also impeccable social behavior. It was imperative that the individual should act “in accordance with the rules of etiquette, courtesy and good manners” (Domingues, 2009, p.4). It was these precepts of civility that should become an integral part of black people’s daily lives in an attempt to shape their habits and “overcome prejudiced views of their behavior, in order to promote social integration between the groups” (Braga, 2015, p.93).

Women, in particular, were scrutinized by the directors of black clubs, who policed their behavior at dances and censured them for actions and procedures that were inconsistent with the conduct expected of the female sex (Pinto, 2013, p.203). In the newspaper published by Elite da Liberdade, we find a controversy in this regard. One columnist, who was certainly a member of *Elite’s* newsroom staff but hid behind the pseudonym Montezuma,³ wrote an editorial entitled “O Baile” (The Dance) in which he says he does not understand how some people could disapprove of women going to the dance and even to recreational spaces. Defending the presence of women at festive events, Montezuma argued that keeping home “daughters as I have already seen, forbidding daughters to go to dances, not allowing in their homes girls who, entertained, attend the

³ *Elite* banned the use of pseudonyms by its employees. That right was only granted to members of the newsroom staff. The pseudonym used by the columnist, Montezuma, is an allusion to the Afro-Brazilian lawyer and politician Francisco Jê Acaiaba de Montezuma, the Viscount of Jequitinhonha, who was the first president of the Brazilian Lawyers Institute. For more information, see: Domingues, 2012.

dances! Why? Out of pure ignorance.” According to him, even if parents thought “that this is the path to evil; even so, you must let them go, because in this world the only way to avoid mistakes is when you know the quality of the mistake”; if daughters are raised “with unlimited [strictness], later on, unaware of the mistake, they are more easily dragged into it” (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.1).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, women in São Paulo were still seen as naturally disposed to being exemplary wives and mothers. Women were supposed to be the “guardians of morality”, as long as they limited themselves to working in the private sphere and followed the traditional female role model of that time: that of the submissive woman. Such images, which particularly referred to the middle and upper classes, also resonated, to some degree, among black women, who were supposed to be good wives and homemakers and bring up their children. The role of men in marriage, in general, was to be providers, and the world of work in the public sphere belonged to them. The meanings ascribed to gender relations were produced from hegemonic representations of behaviors seen at that time as appropriate for men and women. The female social sphere was determined in opposition to the male social sphere. This binarism was reinforced in several cultural instances and helped legitimize unequal relations between the sexes (Rago, 1991; Louro, 1997). Although the subordinate status of many women (white and black) continued in São Paulo, the spaces they occupied outside the home expanded (Cortês, 2012). One of those spaces was the clubs, which increasingly attracted female audiences to their events, such as dances. With polysemic meanings, dances were also a space for flirtation where women were desired by men, had their first emotional experiences regarding the body, and began their adult lives. The *Elite da Liberdade* club’s newspaper went so far as to sensationalize this aspect of such events:

Entwining in our arms an angelic little body, full of freshness, full of temptation that sways in the musical compass in tempting descents, feeling the pleasant breath that comes from her sweet mouth, sometimes hearing a little sigh that betrays ... the beginning of love, listening quietly to a disjointed, babbling phrase filled with voluptuous yearning, all of this is the principle of pleasure, that pleasure which softens the vicissitudes of life.
(*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.1)

Going to dances could, therefore, distance women from their traditional social roles, especially if they were seduced and dishonored. Although he admitted that this was a possibility, Montezuma believed women should attend those festive dances because, in his view, if women had no knowledge of the real world, they would be more easily led into perdition. Clearly, the journalist’s language is steeped in erotic connotations, and the details

he gives of the dance are inclined towards licentiousness. At the end of the editorial, the author justifies himself, claiming not to be advocating “libertinage, debauchery”; he just wants to “say that we must spend this short life casting off sadness, suffering. And how to do it? By increasing pleasure. In what way? WHATEVER FORTUNE PROVIDES...” (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.1. [author’s emphasis]).

In the following issue of *Elite*, a correspondent who signs himself Camargo, probably the newspaper’s editor-in-chief, Theophilo de Camargo, expresses surprise that those considerations should come from a “thoughtful and lucid spirit,” and sends an open letter in response to “friend Montezuma.” Camargo immediately criticizes the writer’s language, describing it as “language of fire,” and goes on to argue against some points defended by Montezuma:

Gadzooks! So, you want the virgin of the timid breasts whom you say has ‘an angelic little body, full of freshness’ to have practical knowledge of the error of perdition?

In that case “the beautiful eyes of a charming blonde or the symmetrical contours of the lovely breast of a beautiful virgin, would no longer have the charm you proclaim, and you, Montezuma, would say your rosary [to expiate] the blame” (*Elite*, March 2, 1924, p.2).

For Camargo, the “profligacy” of black women, which Montezuma encouraged, would lead to “atonement for a past of orgies,” of “disjointed, babbling phrases filled with voluptuous yearning” (*Elite*, March 2, 1924, p.2). Camargo was intent on controlling black women’s gestures and bodies – and for good reason. According to Revel (1991, p.6), “it was on the body that the rules of civility were implemented with the greatest rigor.” Perhaps aware of this, Camargo was concerned about the image and representations of black women (shameless behavior, fickle, hyper-sexualized, etc.), the result of conduct supposedly acquired during slavery and which violated Brazilian family values. In any case, the group associated with black clubs was making strenuous efforts to deconstruct stereotypes that relegated black women to inferior status. To that end, it disseminated lessons in morality, feminine decorum, courtesy, and civility to its members, conceived as modern virtues that dignified social interaction.

Considering his friend’s “most dangerous” position, Camargo recommended that Montezuma relax and unwind at a “short cinematographic session at Colombinho” so he would not write anything worse, “capable of opening a formidable breach in the august wall of family modesty and transforming life [...] into a great Palace of Messalinas” (*Elite*, March 2, 1924, p.2). “Colombinho” was an affectionate reference to the Colombo Theatre. Located in the industrial district of Brás, it was a gathering place for working-class families,

as it was known for its affordable ticket prices. With the advent of film, the Colombo Theatre became a cinema (Casoy, 2005, p.23). “Palace of Messalinas” refers to Messalina, the wife of the Roman emperor Claudius, who became famous for being adulterous and unscrupulous, becoming synonymous with a dissolute woman whose libertine ways were therefore the opposite of the positive images and portrayals of black woman that the group sought to shape.

However, this strict regulation of behavior and morality was not limited to women. José Correia Leite points out the role of the *mestre-sala* or master of ceremonies, who was charged with overseeing the conduct of members at the clubs’ dances and reprimanding anyone who stepped out of line. The chairman of Elite da Liberdade, Alfredo Eugênio da Silva, played that role in 1924, at the Grêmio Dramático e Recreativo Kosmos (*Elite*, January 20, 1924, p.4), a guild of which he was also a member, and before that, at the Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade. Correia Leite himself was said to have been told off by Alfredinho when he visited the club. In middle of the dance, the mestre-sala climbed onto a table and gave the following lecture: “Before going out into society, we must clean up, polish our shoes...” Looking down at his feet, Correia Leite realized that Alfredinho was talking to him. All eyes were upon him. Looking back on the incident, the old activist was filled with regret: “And there I was with a lady by my side!”. He immediately tried to explain himself, saying that he had walked through a football pitch (Leite, 1992, p.46).

Correia Leite’s statement shows that the black people who frequented Elite da Liberdade and similar clubs tried to adapt to certain behavioral and moral codes. Otherwise, they would be shamed within the black milieu, and could even be excluded from the “associative framework” of the clubs (Silva, 1990, p.110). People “who had no way of turning themselves out well simply did not go,” says Leite, and they “had to content themselves with backyard parties”. In other words, to become a member of Elite da Liberdade and other black clubs, it was essential to meet the requirements of civility about clothing, etiquette, and social behavior (Leite, 1992, p.45).

It was worth the effort, however, for being a “*negro de salão*,” as members of the black elite were called, gave the individual status and socio-cultural value within the group. José Correia Leite recalls that, at the backyard parties of those who had “no way of turning themselves out well” at dances, members of the black clubs sparked “bold rivalry” among the ladies, who “ended up competing for the so-called ‘negro de salão,’ who were generally very well dressed and little disposed to drink” (Leite, 1992, p.45). We can see that the members of these clubs were recognized in the black milieu for their lifestyle and symbols of distinction (Bourdieu, 2007) with respect to their dress and mastery, in social life, of the rules of courtesy, etiquette, and good manners. More than that, the “negros de salão” saw themselves, and wished to be seen, as an elite group and tried to display their attributes in

the very names of their clubs. Thus, “Elite da Liberdade” evoked what was best, most intelligent, noble, and valued in that racial group (Andrews, 1998, p.220). As the semantics of the word “elite” indicate, it referred to a select group that enjoyed social prestige in the black milieu.

Dances, with their specific rules, were held throughout the existence of Elite da Liberdade and were the most popular events in its program. Most likely, they were also the main source of revenue for the club; this can be seen in the newspapers. For example, on a Saturday, February 23, 1924, the “‘Elite’ opened its large halls in order to welcome its members to an amusing costume ball,” held for the “benefit of the social coffers” of the club and marking the beginning of that year’s Carnaval revelries. In addition to music and dancing, the festivities were enlivened by a fair, organized collectively, and a *tombola* (a kind of lottery in which prizes were won), with prizes donated by the members. It was hoped that “families and gentle ladies” would not deprive the event of their respective presence (*Elite*, February 17, 1924, p.3; *Elite*, March 2, 1924, p.4).

The mention of families merits a reflection here. If we take into account the post-abolitionist context in which black people were portrayed – at least by Florestan Fernandes – as living in a state of maladjustment, marginalization, disruption, in short, in a state of social anomie (Fernandes, 1978), this statement may be a deliberate indication from Elite da Liberdade’s directors that theirs was a different kind of club: a family-friendly association. In her study on the Renascença Clube in Rio de Janeiro, Sonia Maria Giacomini found that, even in the 1960s the mere presence of stable families structured according to the traditional nuclear model had the power to confer respectability on a recreational association (Giacomini, 1992, p.27). When José Correia Leite expressed curiosity about the Grêmio de Damas Elite Flor da Liberdade, of which the chairman of Elite da Liberdade was a former member, he was loftily informed: “This is the ‘Elite Flor da Liberdade’... It is a family institution....” (Leite, 1992, p.27).

If, on Saturday, February 23, 1924, “Elite” had held an “amusing costume ball,” the next day, a Sunday, it hosted a matinee dedicated to several clubs, 6 de Maio, Kosmos, 15 de Novembro, Smart and União da Mocidade, which, “given the fame enjoyed by the embassies of the above associations,” was a “brilliant success.” When Carnaval finally arrived, on Monday, March 4, “Elite” held another costume ball “with original brilliance.” This time, “the lads and gentle ladies” of the association took part in a competition with votes cast by a secret committee “made up of suitable people,” but we have not been able to find any reports about the contestants or the winners (*Elite*, March 2 1924, p.4). We only know that Alfredinho, the chairman of Elite da Liberdade, dressed up as a bear, and Dilermando, then deputy director of the club’s newspaper, represented the revels (*O Kosmos*, March 16, 1924, p.2).

Elite da Liberdade's most popular celebration took place on October 11, 1924: the club's anniversary. Held in the main hall of the São Paulo Working Classes building – located on Rua do Carmo – the festivities included a solemn ceremony followed by a rhythmic dance with music provided by Vianna's orchestra. Representatives of several black associations, such as Clube dos Cravos Vermelhos, Centro Recreativo Smart, Grupo das Margaridas, Centro Recreativo 6 de Maio, Grupo dos Bohemios, Centro José do Patrocínio and União da Mocidade attended the ceremony. Representing the Grêmio Dramático e Recreativo Kosmos, Mr. Frederico Baptista de Souza, a former editor-in-chief of *Elite*, was present, and since his words could not convey the feelings he wanted to express towards the guild, he presented flowers to Elite da Liberdade so they could translate "with their mute and colorful language a hymn of victory and good wishes for its future" (*O Kosmos*, November 16, 1924, p.4). Representatives of the newspapers *A Metralha* and *O Getulino* were also in attendance. The number of representatives of black institutions is an indicator that Elite da Liberdade's cross-cutting activities had an impact throughout the state capital and even in the interior of São Paulo State, given the presence of associations from the city of Campinas (Centro José do Patrocínio and the newspaper *O Getulino*).

In 1925, there were no reports on Elite da Liberdade festivities published in the black press. However, the guild appeared in the "Vice Squad" section in the February 1 issue of the newspaper *Correio Paulistano*. Under the subheading "War on Pornographic Literature," report stated that the "authorities in charge of the Vice Squad, driven by what takes place at dances in certain clubs where decency and morals are absent, constituting, therefore...dens of iniquity, "decided" to close such antechambers of vice." The clubs they shut down included several black associations: Flor da Maravilha, Campos Elyseos, Cravos Vermelhos, Smart, Paulistano, Auriverde, Flor da Mocidade and Elite da Liberdade (*Correio Paulistano*, February 1, 1925, p.3).

In a study of Rio's recreational clubs in the early twentieth century, Leonardo Affonso Pereira (2013) demonstrates that such entities were the preferred targets of agencies of repression. Given this, obtaining an operating license from the Morals and Entertainment Department was a means of holding events without risking police intervention. For example, when the Clube Dançante Familiar Anjos da Meia-Noite (Mid-Night Angels Family Dance Club), was arbitrarily prevented from operating in December 1909, it decided to go to court, because that way the police would have no problems with the club, which obeyed the "provisions of regulations regarding the operations of civil associations" (Fonseca, 2009, p.114). Despite having a constitution drafted by a notary public (a legal document at the time) and endeavoring to mold its members to conform with the standards of modern civility, Elite da Liberdade was viewed with suspicion by São Paulo's "morals police."

Although they were officially constituted, these societies did not always manage to avoid pressure from the police. Even though their operations were officially authorized, they were constantly under threat of being banned by the forces of surveillance and repression, which would prevent them from carrying on with their activities. The members of Anjos da Meia Noite – which operated continuously in its early years – were surprised by a petition forwarded to the Chief of Police by the District Chief Constable, Benedicto da Costa Ribeiro, requesting that their license be revoked due to the club's "makeup," as it was allegedly a "meeting place for common prostitutes, troublemakers and thieves" (Pereira, 2013, p.109).

Returning to the February 1, 1925 issue of the *Correio Paulistano*, the newspaper also reported that only "societies that scrupulously obey the law, bona fide clubs that are governed by officially approved statutes and are led by people of proven morals," were "licensed to operate without hindrance" (*Correio Paulistano*, February 1, 1925, p.3). Whether or not it fulfilled all these requirements, a year later, Elite da Liberdade saw its festivities reported once again, on the occasion of its second anniversary. The commemoration took place, according to the newspaper *O Clarim d'Alvorada*, on January 16, 1926. That date is strange, since the club's first anniversary celebration was held in October, and because, as it fell on a certain date, it should not be changeable. We believe that the change occurred due to difficulties in carrying out the event or because the newspaper report came out after the anniversary of Elite da Liberdade. However, there is a possibility that the celebration was held without a legal authorization. This is because the *Correio Paulistano* would only announce that a permit was issued to reopen the guild in July 1927 (*Correio Paulistano*, July 21, 1927, p.10). In any case, all indications are that, before it closed its doors for the last time that same year, Elite da Liberdade suspended its activities more than once, having been shut down by agencies of surveillance and repression, after which the club probably went to court to obtain its operating permit.

Conclusion

The black clubs of São Paulo in the first decades of the twentieth century were places of sociability and harmony as well as visibility and a means of social inclusion and mobility. These associations exercised a kind of social control over their members, requiring good behavior. Their leaders advocated the assimilation of attributes such as good character, manners and morals in order to educate and reform black people, freeing them from all the "vices" acquired during slavery. While these clubs sought to play an educational role, disassociating black people from the negative stereotypes inherited from slave times, they endeavored to instil discipline in their members to ensure that they followed the rules of etiquette, courtesy and good manners. The aim was to demonstrate a

certain “evolution” in black people.

Thus, it was a matter of regulating the social conduct of this segment of the population, dictating attitudes and behaviors in light of cultural standards considered modern and civilized for the coexistence of individuals in social spaces. While the narratives conveyed by these clubs valued the rules of conduct and good manners, they also condemned habits that did not conform to the civility “manuals” as being inappropriate, harmful, and ill-bred.

One of these most prominent clubs during that period was the Grêmio Dramático, Recreativo e Literário Elite da Liberdade, which was active in the city of São Paulo from 1919 to 1927. Elite da Liberdade was a privileged place of sociability for black residents of São Paulo in the 1920s. This made it possible to forge ties of ethnic solidarity among its members, bolstering the work of mobilizing black people, valuing their identity and lifestyle, and fighting for their full inclusion in society, in the field of rights and citizenship. Within the club, “men and women of color” could nurture their racial pride, express their subjectivity and become recognized as protagonists of their own history in an exchange of experiences and references in the Black Diaspora.

Halfway between civil society and private family life, Elite da Liberdade allowed its members, at least in the sphere of entertainment, to experience aspects of public life that they were denied elsewhere. It was an environment built in response to the “color line” in the city of São Paulo, as well as an expression of the expectation of self-determination of the black community that tried to live for themselves, similar to the experiences of other ethnic groups (such as Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Polish immigrants and their descendants) that also established their own recreational societies. Apparently, when they learned about the existence of Elite da Liberdade, several black São Paulo residents felt represented by that club and, like José Correia Leite, they even came to think proudly: “I have an association that is mine, my people, my folk” (Leite, 1992, p.26).

Like other clubs of that time (Pereira, 2002; Siqueira, 2009), Elite da Liberdade prescribed a set of civility precepts, regulating and standardizing its members’ conduct in the way they dressed and behaved at festive events, in gender relations, in the rules of courtesy, in short, in the most varied activities and aspects of social life. The prescriptions of civility, which then characterized the language of modernity, were appropriated by the club’s representatives to make black citizenship positive and, therefore, to re-signify the images and representations associated with that segment of the population. Borrowing the discourse that circulated in the hegemonic culture and adapting it to the sociability spaces of the black milieu, Elite da Liberdade must be seen as a recreational association formed by “men and women of color” who, without giving up their subjectivity and ethnic identities, (re)invented a way of being both black and modern simultaneously.

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