

The signs of Brazilian fashion in Dorival Caymmi's Bahian songbook

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<http://doi.org/10.38119/cacs.2025.35.4>

Received August 30, 2025; accepted September 16, 2025; published online September 30, 2025

Abstract: The aim of this text is to explore conceptually, within the specific spectrum of song, the possible approximations between fashion and literature. In addition, it aims to reveal the meanings attributed to certain items of clothing in Dorival Caymmi's work; and, as a consequence, to propose a reflection on the participation of the fashion system, clothing, material culture - and consumption - and the song itself as constituent, defining and dynamising elements of Brazilian culture. To this end, we began with a conceptual overview of the symbolic relationships between music and literature, followed by an analysis of the songs 'O que é que a baiana tem?', 'Vestido de bolero', 'Requebre que eu dou um doce', "Maracangalha" and 'A vizinha do lado'. The analyses were able to highlight the dense meanings of fashion and its privileged place in the formation of the Brazilian imagination, as well as being a source of inspiration in artistic, musical and literary productions.

Keywords: fashion, literature, song, Dorival Caymmi, semiotics

1. Introduction

Fashion and literature can be integrated in various ways, through different expressions, but almost always one serves as the content or inspiration for the other. The analysis proposed in this paper is no exception, focusing on a specific literary manifestation: the song, which integrates lyrics and melody, as well as literature and music. Following on from previous work (Perez & Pompeu, 2024), in which the skirt was analyzed in the lyrics of various Brazilian songs - not coincidentally taking Dorival Caymmi's samba as a starting point - our aim in this text is to look analytically at this composer's specific songbook, checking what meanings the lyrics of his works attribute to some typical - and mythical - pieces of Brazilian clothing

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Based on the assumption that language - in this case, verbal, literary, but not completely leaving aside musical and even fashion language - is the expressive result of a given culture and a given society and, at the same time, an instrument of reiteration, updating, transformation, stylization, etc. of that same culture and that same society (Sapir, 1980, p. 20), we seek to understand the meanings that become dynamic, based on Caymmi's work, in certain items of clothing mentioned by the composer, taken here as signs. As such, these items—skirts, sandals, dresses, etc.—impose on us an assumedly semiotic theoretical-methodological perspective of Peircean extraction, especially using the concepts and analytical resources presented in his *Speculative Grammar* (Peirce, 1995). This is not, however, a work that focuses on the intricate and internal details of the analysis itself, but rather one that, based on these analyses, seeks to reflect on how fashion and literature, in Caymmi's songbook, participate in the process of founding the imaginary of what is now called Bahia.

Our proposal, in essence, consists of, all at once, exploring conceptually, within the specific spectrum of the song, the possible approximations between fashion and literature; revealing the meanings attributed to certain items of clothing in Dorival Caymmi's work; and, as a consequence, proposing reflection on the participation of the fashion system, clothing, material culture - and consumption - and the song itself as constituent, defining and dynamic elements of Brazilian culture.

2. A brief theoretical and conceptual framework

Before we move on to the actual analysis and reflections, let us present some theoretical and conceptual definitions that we feel are necessary to provide a better foundation for our work. Starting with the one that will support our choice to work with songs.

Critic Steven Paul Scher - understood here from Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira's reading of his work (2020, 2002) - one of the main references on the subject, taking up Calvin Brown's (2008) earlier thinking, proposes the concept of “melopoetics”, in which three main possibilities for the relationship between music and literature are defined.

The first, called “Literature in Music”, refers to musical works composed of literary texts, but without any textual excerpts. These are musical works composed of literary works, not just as a mere thematic inspiration, but also on the principle of a certain parallelism between the narrative elements and sequences of the written text and the musical components of the composition. As if, in these cases, to put it very simply, the musical work was a version of the literary work.

The second possibility is the so-called “Music in Literature”, which, although it includes a wide variety of manifestations, can be understood as an attempt to bring elements typical of music into the written text, whether in its sound, structure, or content.

The possible relationship between text and music that interests us most here is the one Scher calls “Music and Literature”, a type of relationship in which the parts complement each other, add to each other, and integrate, in a relationship of mutual equivalence. It is the song, characterized by the almost indissoluble marriage between a text and a melody, a harmonic structure, and a verbal narrative project, between ideas expressed by words and syllables and feelings evoked by notes and musical intervals. Luiz Tatit (2002, 2001) is the one who best, in

the field of semiotics - from a Greimasian perspective, nonetheless - characterizes the song precisely based on this deep and indissoluble interaction between music and literature, “neither of which plays a subordinate role” (Oliveira, 2002, p. 31). Song that, although popular in most parts of the world, finds certain special traits in Brazil, revealing itself to be not only a simple artistic expression, but an essential feature of our culture (Tatit, 2022; Severiano & Homem de Mello, 1998, 1997), at once a mirror that reflects and projects, a lens that increases and decreases and a filter that transforms and aestheticizes.

The choice of Dorival Caymmi's songbook is justified by several factors. Firstly, because he was a popular composer who took part in an artistic, intellectual and political process of creation and crystallization of the Bahian and Brazilian imaginary, even in the 1930s and 1940s - a process well described by Ortiz (2012) - but who also integrated - and in some way anticipated - the artistic expression that would characterize so-called modern Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, the time of Bossa Nova (Caymmi, 2008; Castro, 2015, 1991). In other words, we are dealing with a work whose relevance lies not only in itself, in its artistic, literary, and musical value, but also in its deep and evident connection with the broader dimensions of national identity.

Caymmi, in his work, gives form, materiality, and imaginary input to what has been conceived, since then and to this day, as Bahia and, Bahia being what it is (Risério, 2024), as Brazil. The lyrics of his compositions, many of them portraying and (re)creating everyday situations, describing common landscapes, relationships, and social bonds, become simple chronicles that are, at the same time, narrative, prescriptive, and projective of this Brazil and this Bahia. To deal with the composer and his work, we have used not only a previous publication (Pompeu, 2008), but also a vast bibliography that scrutinizes his production in various aspects, whether based on his artistic career (Caymmi, 2001; Barbosa, 1985) or highlighting the relevance of his work in Brazilian culture (Bosco, 2006; Risério, 1993).

Finally, it's worth saying that, to deal with fashion, we start from the understanding of clothing as a specific element in the complex fashion system (Köhler, 2009; Boucher, 2012; Barthes, 1979) and from the understanding of fashion as a system of symbolic essence and linguistic nature (Mello e Souza, 2019; Paz Gago, 2016; Calefato, 2002).

3. Songs about fashion

Dorival Caymmi is not one of the most extensive composers of so-called Brazilian Popular Music (MPB). While Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, and Gilberto Gil, to name three of Caymmi's direct “descendants”, composed more than 500, 600, and 700 songs respectively, Caymmi himself has around 70 “songs” of his own, which, contrary to what one might imagine, only increases the importance of his contribution. Not only because he signed, often alone, true national hits that defy time, such as “O que é que a baiana tem?”, ‘Marina’ and “O samba da minha terra” (the one that says that “Anyone who doesn't like samba isn't a good person; they're bad in the head or sick in the foot”) - but also because he has a dense, cohesive body of work, perfectly balanced between simplicity and sophistication, essential in the very definition of what MPB is all about (Severiano, 2013; Albin, 2003).

It is customary to organize his work into three main parts: the so-called beach songs, which deal with the emotional, work and mythological routine of the old fishing communities of Bahia; the sambas-canção, with a predominantly amorous theme, now recognized as a true anticipation of that harmonic-musical aesthetic later more evident in bossa nova; and the more, shall we say, boisterous sambas, almost always dedicated to the description of everyday situations and the quasi-chronic commentary of banal facts. It is from this third part that we will extract the songs we are going to analyze next, precisely because of their descriptive and everyday nature, comprising glimpses of this imagined reality, this real imaginary, half story, half dream, proposed by Dorival Caymmi.

As has already been demonstrated (Perez & Pompeu, 2024), the Caymmi song that stands out most for its relationship with fashion is “O que é que a baiana tem?”, from 1939, composed for and released in the film “Banana da terra”, starring Carmen Miranda. In the same way that Caymmi would later release the first samba-recipe in history - “Vatapá”, from 1957, detailing, with some fantasy, the process of making this delicacy - in “O que é que a baiana tem?” something that could be called, with due license, a samba-dress code, listing the items that make up the supposedly typical costume of a Bahian woman: silk torso, gold earrings, gold chain, coastal cloth, lacy gown, gold bracelet, starched skirt, embellished sandals, gold rosary and, of course, balangandans.

What stands out in the song, if heard in its original context, as the soundtrack to a scene in which Carmen Miranda embodies the Bahian, will be the skirt, which is not white, voluminous, and flouncy, like the one seen in other historical accounts of the Bahian of Bahia and the imagery evoked by Caymmi himself. In the film, what we see is “a playful reinterpretation, with a multicolored diamond skirt and a golden bustier” (Prado & Braga, 2011, p. 9). In any case, if we focus only on the lyrics of the song, we can see the complexity of this garment, which combines elements of African ancestry, such as the Ivory Coast cloth, with European signs of ostentation, such as the gold rosary. Not to mention the materiality described by the composer, which is certainly important in the composition of this costume - the silk of the torso, the lace of the gown - and the importance of adornment - the ornament on the sandal, the size of the rosary (“an acorn like this”) and the balangandan itself, the absence of which would prevent people from attending certain sacred places, such as “the Bonfim”, a metonymy for the Bomfim Lord Sanctuary in Salvador.

Color, one of the elements most recognized as representative of Brazilian fashion - “a Brazilian way of selecting and mixing colors”, in the words of Glória Kalil (in Prado & Braga, 2011, p. 10) - is prominently present in the song “Vestido de bolero”, from 1944. If you look closely, this is its motto. The second part of the lyrics describes how one of the main pieces, a “burgundy coat”, integrates into the whole look: “if the coat is red / everyone will wear it / green, blue and white skirt/everyone will wear it / despite this mixture/everyone will like it”. It is the mixture of colors, typical of Brazilian fashion, in turn mixed here with a process now typical of fashion as a whole: the principle of imitation (Perez & Pompeu, 2020). In other words: even though the chromatic blending may be strange or exotic in taste, “everyone will wear it” - with emphasis on the expression that, as it was used at the time, means to have as a habit, to assimilate as a custom. In addition, what will guarantee this, this mimesis effect, this spreading of trends, as we would say today? Caymmi concludes: “é que debaixo do bolero / lero, lero, lero / tem você, iaiá”[‘is that under the bolero / lero, lero, lero / there's you, iaiá].

This brings us directly to the classic discussions on fashion, consumption, and identity (Calefato, 2002; Campbell, 2006; Lipovetsky & Roux, 2005; Paz Gago, 2016). In the lyrics of the song, the combination of a colorful dress with a red coat will spread as a trend not only because of its aesthetic or style qualities, but also because of the figure wearing it - in this case, the *iaia*.

Caymmi was an aesthete. He composed, played the guitar, and sang, but he also painted, idealized visual identities, and, there is no denying it, brought to his compositions a radically admiring look at the beauty in things. Hence, his enchantment with fashion, as highlighted here, but also with the “‘sacadas’ dos sobrados”, the “‘areia’ de Itapuã”, and the “‘cem barquinhos brancos’ nas ondas do mar”. Caymmi's musical work is as visual as it is tactile, even syncretic in the way it combines senses and sensations. The sound of the verses is coated with words that portray imagery full of touchable surfaces, sometimes even evoking the taste of a sweet or an *abará*. This can be seen in the coat and dress offered to the *iaia* in the song in question, which are burgundy and velvet, respectively.

In “Requebre que eu dou um doce”, from 1941, the dancing girl's outfit is described based on three main elements: an accessory - the beads, which swing when she shakes in the samba - footwear - the sandal, also called a *chinelo* [flip-flops] in the lyrics, duly adorned with a “grená pompom” - and a piece of clothing - the skirt, which goes round and round in the samba circle.

The analysis shows us that, in essence, the lyrics of the song deal with three very central aspects of Brazilian fashion. Firstly, the relationship between clothing and a body that is always thought of as being in movement, the movement of a dance, a ritualistic party, an occasion that calls for adornment, all symbolized in the beads, certainly long and colorful necklaces. Then, the preference for elements that are more suitable or adapted to our context, be it Bahian, Brazilian or tropical, evident in the flip-flops and sandals, with leather straps and low soles, open, conducive to the heat, good for walking on the uneven cobbled streets and for the chap-chap of the feet on the ground favored by the lightness of the footwear, characteristic of the Bahian samba circle. And finally, a legacy of the typically colonial assimilation of European items, especially French ones, into Brazilian fashion (Raspanti, 2011, p. 194), almost always as a sign of quality, sophistication and superiority, as in the taffeta, present on the hem of the song's skirt, possibly functioning as a weight that expands the wheel of a lighter structure, perhaps made of cambric or linen, which not coincidentally rhymes with *grená*, the color of the pompom that adorns the shoe. These are three elements of French origin (*taffetas*, *grenat*, and *pompon*), perfectly integrated into Brazilian ways.

However, Caymmi, who invented Marina, Dora, and Doralice, also talked about men. If in “João Valentão”, from 1953, the focus was on the protagonist's paradoxical behavior and feelings, in “Maracangalha”, composed in 1955, the issue is, let us say, a very masculine worldview - at least for the time. The song was inspired by Zezinho, a good friend of Caymmi's from his youth, who, when he was going to cheat on his wife with a girlfriend who lived in another city, would say he was going to Maracangalha, to throw her off the scent.

Maracangalha is the name given to a small district in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, close to the capital, Salvador, where a sugar mill was set up between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Caymmi certainly liked the sound of the word, imagined a certain mythical place, and made a first verse like this: “eu vou pra Maracangalha, eu vou”, with this “eu vou”[I'm going] proving to be a repeated motif throughout the first part of the

lyrics. “I’m going in a white *liforme*, I’m going / I’m going in a straw hat, I’m going / I’m going to invite Anália, I’m going”. The lyrics characterize the way this man dresses, who is looking for his Bahian Pasárgada, who invites himself to be accompanied, but who, if he is not reciprocated, goes anyway - “I’m going alone, without Anália / but I’m going”.

The “*liforme*” mentioned in the song immediately stands out because of the spelling of the word itself, reproducing the popular - and more sonorous - way of saying “uniform”, which, in the context, can be understood as a suit, a garment defined by its sobriety and formal suitability for a certain occasion. In all likelihood, it is not a military uniform or an urban worker's uniform; as such figures would be absolutely out of place in the imagery painted by the composer's songbook. And the cover of the album that featured the song, entitled *Eu vou pra Maracangalha* (I'm going to Maracangalha), features an illustration by the cartoonist Lan of a figure like Dorival Caymmi rounded up, wearing white pants and jacket, and therefore in uniform.

The “straw hat”, mentioned in the sequence, makes up the character's outfit, functioning as one of those typical signs of Brazilianness, which combines formality and comfort, European heritage, and a *brejeiro*-tropical style. We could go deeper into these analyses, especially if we refer to the reflective exercises of Flávio de Carvalho, an important name when thinking about Brazilian fashion, especially men's fashion. The round, brimmed hat, the *Petassos* (2010, p. 244); the modern trend in men's fashion towards rigidity, the rejection of ornamentation and formality (2010, p. 207), all of this is there - in Caymmi too.

Some of Caymmi's other songs briefly mention other items of clothing, such as “*A vizinha do lado*”, from 1946, which says that “the neighbor, when she passes by/with her *grená* dress/everyone says she's hot/but there's no one like her”. Many others evoke, between poetic subtlety and the suggestive power of words, female figures, all to be imagined in their costumes. Francisca Santos das Flores, from “*Dona Chica*”, from 1972, an older woman, who is surprised by the greatness of her newly declared love; Rosa, from “*Rosa morena*”, from 1942, with her rose in her hair and “this prose girl walk”; the protagonist of “*Marina*”, from 1947, who angers her lover for having painted her face, since she is so beautiful “with what God gave her”; or even “*Dora*”, from 1945, “queen of frevo and maracatu”, certainly imagined in outfits tailored for such an occasion, they all make up Caymmi's imaginary universe, which, without fashion, without these mentions, sometimes more direct, sometimes more subtle, of clothing, accessories, material culture, would not be what it is.

4. Some considerations

Defining, conceptualizing, understanding, or even reporting on Brazilian fashion, whether in contemporary times or from a historical perspective, is a challenging undertaking that has mobilized researchers from various fields for many decades, including something that can already be called its field of knowledge. Gilberto Freyre, who today is much criticized by those who have not read his work, the forerunner of reflections on Brazilian fashion, touched on an obvious social-ideological hornet's nest, and put it this way:

In other words, a growing overcoming, by Brazilians, of the awareness of racial origins considered in their purity, or of such pure situations, by a social-anthropological, or culturally anthropological, type of Brazilian, nationally Brazilian. The figure of the meta-ethnicity Brazilian woman must

always be present in the sensibility of the designer who feels responsible for creating dresses - especially dresses - (...), with no shortage of creations adapted to pure or predominantly Aryan Brazilian women. (Freyre, 2009, p. 192)

He is clearly talking about mixing, miscegenation, and syncretism - this very distinctive feature of Brazilian culture, not always properly framed in its production in the fashion world. Gilda Chataignier seems to point us in the right direction when she says:

It is worth remembering that Brazilian fashion is a term that has become commonplace, right here where it was born - and yet those who mention it may be unaware of its origins. When Brazilians - who are at the center of the issue - talk about themselves as “fashionable people”, they should be less boastful and look more closely at the books, magazines, and other media that provide relevant information about clothing, style, and fashion. There is no doubt that fashion is, and always has been, part of our culture. (2010, p. 17)

Moreover, Dorival Caymmi's work, as we have tried to show here, shows us that artistic and musical - and literary - productions also need to be included in this list of sources of knowledge about Brazilian fashion. It is not about taking music as a precise record of the past, a mere social report, or a reliable expression of reality - that is not even up to us, it's a job for archaeology, history, and documentation. For us semioticians, scholars of language and culture, what matters is understanding how meanings are mobilized, produced and transformed in our culture, recognizing the need for this to be done with an attentive eye to fashion, consumption and material culture on the one hand, and music, literature and popular artistic production on the other, always faithful to the theories mobilized by the objects and the methods of investigation.

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