

The Voyage over the Sea and Beyond

Cultural Exchange of Capoeira

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“Passar bem ou passar mal tudo no mundo é passar, camará.”¹

Capoeira is called a game². Two players at a time play in the middle of a circle, or *roda*, formed by other *capoeiristas*³ and musicians, practitioners also. The music is an inseparable part of the *roda*; the sound of the *berimbau*⁴, other instruments, and singing evoke energy and spirit. The *roda* encircles the players allowing them to fully focus on the game. Capoeira games themselves can be very different in character. They range from acrobatic show-off with harmonious and flexible dance improvisations to a palpable rivalry of wit and agility, or a combination of all at once. Capoeira may be practiced, learned, and used in diverse contexts from folklore performances for tourists, to physical education classes, to athletic competitions, and for self-defense⁵, depending on the purpose and the style. Therefore, categorization of capoeira into one particular type of genre is difficult. Additionally, the development of capoeira has followed a rather complex and controversial path.⁶

From Subjugation to Recognition

The history of capoeira is still to a great extent unexplored and contradictory, yet epic and mythical. Some say that colonial Brazil was the cradle of capoeira. Another more contemporary paradigm sees capoeira wholly as a West African art form, which had

¹ Nestor Capoeira (2006, p. 11) “Good times or bad times everything in this world goes with time, *camará*.” A traditional capoeira song

² The verb ‘to play’ is commonly used to describe the action of performing the physical movements of capoeira. Portuguese equivalent for the verb ‘to play’ is ‘*jogar*’ and for the noun ‘game’ is ‘*jogo*’.

³ A person practicing the art of capoeira

⁴ A bow-like instrument that is very important for the twentieth century capoeira.

⁵ Downey (2002, p. 490)

⁶ Lowell Lewis (1995, pp. 221-243)

been practiced in Angola and transplanted to Brazil,⁷ thus being subject to transatlantic diffusion. The most acknowledged and perhaps cherished view of the origins of capoeira would see the birth of capoeira roughly as a nature-inspired, escape-defense game of the enslaved Africans.⁸ These transcultural visitors had brought their African cultural heritage with them over the Atlantic to the New World. Once on Brazilian soil the subjugated and weaponless slaves invented cunning ways to defend themselves, disguising training into a harmless dance.⁹ Thus from these resisting slaves, capoeira was born.



Picture 1. Jogar Capoeira – Danse de la guerre by Johan Moritz Rugendas (1835)

The tradition of capoeira was passed from generation to generation in oral form. It was greatly influenced by Portuguese-imported Catholicism on one hand, and the Afro-Brazilian religion candomblé on the other. Nestor Capoeira (2002), a contemporary capoeira *mestre*, accentuates the modern side of capoeira by mentioning that capoeira is an urban phenomenon establishing itself since the time of slavery in three of Brazil's

⁷ Röhrig-Assunção (2005, p. 7)

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 6

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6

largest port towns.¹⁰ Whatever the “genuine” origins of capoeira might be, it is most probable that the modern notion of the art consists of the amalgam of African and native Brazilian cultural heritage without denying the impact of the Portuguese colonial power.

In broad terms, capoeira can be described simultaneously as a fight, a dance and a game and is often referred to as a Brazilian martial art^{11,12,13} or martial dance¹⁴. In Brazil, there have been attempts to standardize capoeira. The biggest and the most widespread capoeira academies often have particular guidelines regarding the game, the outfit or the music. Some conventions were made to prevent capoeira from going too far astray from its “origins”; certain standardized practices and methods for different schools of capoeira were developed. The first attempts of standardization or modernization of capoeira started in the beginning of the twentieth century. With the initiative of the founding father of Capoeira Regional, *Mestre* Bimba, these developments led to legalization of the art in 1937 and later capoeira was made the Brazilian national sport.¹⁵

Another very important figure in the development and shaping a capoeira style, more precisely Capoeira *Angola*, was *Mestre* Pastinha. These *mestres* are considered to be the changing point for capoeira at an ideological level: the focus changed from the *valentão*¹⁶ practiced by the so called “outlawed” to the “educators”.¹⁷ This idea of capoeira shifted the focus of the game from being a tool against the other player, to a game creating dialogue through body language and music with the fellow *capoeiristas*. *Mestre* Pastinha’s thoughts of advancing the reputation of Capoeira *Angola* prevented the spiritual character of capoeira sinking into oblivion as the arrival of the new, modernized forms of more athletic capoeira developed. The fundamental element and philosophical tradition of capoeira i.e. *fundamentos* was to be kept safe with the *mestres* and the pupils who got this oral heritage and experience from their *mestres* would then

¹⁰ Nestor Capoeira (2002, p. xxii)

¹¹ Delamont & Stephens (2008, p. 58)

¹² Hedegard (2007)

¹³ Lowell Lewis (1995)

¹⁴ Downey (2002, p. 487)

¹⁵ Röhrig-Assunção (2005, p. 137)

¹⁶ “Tough-guy”

¹⁷ Nestor Capoeira (2006, p. 42)

continue to teach the techniques as well as the philosophy of capoeira to future generations.^{18,19}

Diffusion of Capoeira as a Cultural Item

Generally diffusionism is seen as the study of the geographical distribution and migration of cultural traits. Following this thought diffusionism would encompass the idea, that the birth of capoeira had its roots in West Africa but had developed in Brazil to the capoeira that is today most known in the world. According to Blaut (1987) the definition of diffusionism contains the idea that changes are produced by diffusion instead of independent invention and that certain places are the permanent centers of innovation. He criticizes, among other things, the belief that Europe or the West would be those permanent places of invention. Instead, he suggests uniformitarianism, which means that all communities have the same potential for invention and innovation.²⁰ In this case study, I refer to diffusionism as migration of any cultural trait/s from any place of the world.

As mentioned earlier, capoeira has travelled from afar and has had several places in the world that have made it the art that most people recognize it today. Capoeira started its European conquest in the 80s and 90s, first landing in Berlin and subsequently all the big cities of Europe.²¹ The migrating capoeira *mestres* were the new transcultural visitors who might have even earned a better living teaching and performing capoeira outside their home countries.²² From China to Switzerland, capoeira has become so popular that the Brazilian teachers can no longer have the monopoly over teaching capoeira; the “gringos”, or non-Brazilian teachers, are nowadays also acknowledged ambassadors of capoeira alongside the Brazilian teachers.²³

Apart from capoeira teachers, the students are constantly engaging in intercultural exchange. It is not rare for capoeiristas outside Brazil to make long or short term “cultural visits” to Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, where they can participate in lessons and learn to understand the different cultural traditions behind their beloved sport.

¹⁸ Nestor Capoeira (2006)

¹⁹ Nestor Capoeira (2002)

²⁰ Blaut (1987)

²¹ Röhrig-Assunção (2005 p. xiii)

²² Nestor Capoeira (2006, p. xx)

²³ Nestor Capoeira (2002, p. xix)

Capoeira, in its self, is often the main reason for most of the capoeiristas to travel to Brazil. There, amidst the people, nature, and everyday life they can become closer in understanding the idea behind many of the stories and songs they have been learning. They will learn to live in a culture, among new language and values, which could differ greatly from their own. When they return to their countries, they will naturally bring these new insights back with them and share this knowledge with others. Capoeira groups outside of Brazil often invite visitors and teachers from Brazil or other countries to their events, creating and maintaining a vibrant cultural exchange network. Since capoeira is a performing art, the artistic inspiration and experience is most often shared with the public and not merely kept within a small intrinsic group.

Capoeira as a culture complex has been successfully accepted outside the Afro-Brazilian world. Perhaps also the feeling of wanting to be part of something reaching beyond our time and place draws people amidst something as spiritual as capoeira. Through capoeira, some capoeiristas in Europe or elsewhere might have found capoeira as a builder of a collective entity, which is rare in today's Western individualistic lifestyle. Certainly for many people capoeira is mostly an enjoyable way of keeping in good condition. One might, however, claim that the fascination of capoeira stems from its mythical roots and the modern man's and woman's craving for rituals and feeling of belonging to a close social group.



Picture 2. Playing the berimbau

Make Art, Not War

For many *capoeiristas* capoeira has never been a mere sport or *passé-temps*. Some *capoeiristas* use the philosophy of capoeira also outside the *roda* by applying the wisdom, or the *malícia*,²⁴ of the game to their everyday life.²⁵ Throughout its history, capoeira has been used for different purposes ranging from political and revolutionary intentions, or manifestations of rights of the oppressed. Slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes have been living in Brazil for centuries, but discontent and revolts broke out after the independence of Brazil in 1822.²⁶ According to Holloway (1993) the game we know today, used to denote gangs. These gangs, led by slaves and free blacks, flourished in the biggest cities of Brazil during the 1830s slave resistances. At that time capoeira meant razors, daggers, stones, and clubs, and was illegally used as a weapon for freedom, self-esteem and hope.²⁷ The element of fight in the art form was emphasized and used as a means to overcome slavery, class domination and poverty either physically or ideologically. Later, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the role of capoeira was most often seen the other way around: capoeira was the means to reduce violence since it could necessitate a “venting” of mischievous thoughts, for it uses a lot of energy, is a form of music and dance, and allows fighting under controlled conditions.²⁸ In order to excel in capoeira, means that the *capoeirista* must also possess qualities such as patience, self-control and even humbleness to a certain degree.

Any art form can be used to demonstrate numerous different causes depending on the practitioners. According to Downey (2002) capoeira is no exception:

*“[...] practitioners have historically allied capoeira with avant-garde arts, folklore groups, the military, the national government, leftist groups, private sporting academies, children’s fitness programs, and psychotherapy. Programs with capoeira have been founded on Pan-Africanism, Brazilian nationalism, anti-racism, Bahian regionalism, and blatant commercialism.”*²⁹

²⁴ “Cunning” or “savvy” that might be seen as humour, technical virtuosity, deceptiveness, the ability to anticipate another’s actions, a sense of the dramatic, or even malicious opportunism (Downey, 2002, p. 491).

²⁵ Lowell Lewis (1995, pp. 227-228)

²⁶ Flory (1977, p. 223)

²⁷ Holloway (1989, pp. 637-643)

²⁸ Lowell Lewis (1999, p. 546)

²⁹ Downey (2002, p. 490)

In the book *Music and Social Movements*, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) claim that by combining culture and politics, both parties will benefit. To them cultural traditions are mobilized and reformulated into social movements, and this in turn, is central to what social movements are, and to what they signify for social and cultural change.³⁰ Adams (2002) presents the inconsistencies of practice and research: activists, in general, know that art can be used effectively for certain political aims; yet social movement scholars have paid little attention to this topic.³¹ Often, the responsibility for change is passed on to anonymous universal forces, such as modernization, capitalism, and powerful leaders. However, scholars neglect the power of social movements as catalysts for changing values, ideas and ways of life.³² On the other hand, history has shown us how mobilization of cultural values has had the power to agitate masses and arouse change in good and bad; in progressive or reactionary ways.³³

Now that the times of the slavery in Brazil are over, the memory of the oppression and racial discrimination still evoke feelings, which are, for instance, expressed in numerous capoeira song lyrics. The past may work as a source of inspiration for those who want to use capoeira to spread charity. Capoeira performances can be seen in various social movement contexts. Capoeira groups all over the world have been establishing civil society initiatives to help the underprivileged or to raise awareness of civil society issues. There are numerous examples of these kinds of initiatives: *Gingando pela Paz* has a capoeira project involving Haitian children.³⁴ *Arcola Capoeira* in the UK organised workshops to explore the themes of citizenship, international development and climate change.³⁵ *Academia Jangada* in Berlin had a dance project called “Dance against Racism” in 2009.³⁶ Some groups have more ideological objectives: Brazilian *Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho* uses Capoeira Angola for sociopolitical improvement and the preservation of Afro-Brazilian culture.

So far in this case study it has proven that culture, society, and politics are rather integrated elements. The definition of cultural diplomacy also includes all these elements. Cummings (2003) describes cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, and

³⁰ Eyerman & Jamison (1998, p. 7)

³¹ Adams (2002, p. 21)

³² Eyerman & Jamison (1998, p. 7)

³³ Ibid. (p. 10)

³⁴ Comunidad Segura (2009)

³⁵ Arcola Capoeira (2010)

³⁶ Academia Jangada (2009)

other cultural aspects, such as values and traditions, with the intention to enhance mutual understanding.³⁷ Capoeira as an art form is able to introduce Brazilian culture overseas, for it enables relationship building between nations, demonstrates values and traditions, is an art form used for charity and is able to reach out to a wide audience. From this perspective, capoeira may be seen as a form of cultural diplomacy that is manifesting itself through social movements among other means. It seems that the practitioners of capoeira have understood the power of art as a form of cultural diplomacy and a tool of supporting better quality of life.

Conclusion

The history of capoeira is certainly full of controversies and confrontation. The dawn of capoeira was gloomy, yet little by little the art achieved its status as an antithesis to violence and is proving to be a rich soil for cultivating cultural-exchange, potential civil society initiatives and social movements. Today its cult reputation blossoms outside the borders of Brazil more eclectic than ever, thanks to active capoeira teachers who were, and still are, the cultural mediators of capoeira and genuine cultural diplomats, along with the travelling capoeira students. Afro-Brazilian culture traits, such as the myth of capoeira, the music, and the techniques have travelled from afar but still are present one way or another in contemporary capoeira culture abroad. In this case study, I have focused on the polarity of the foundations of Afro-Brazilian capoeira and the modern-day capoeira all around the world. Despite slight cultural differences, some aspects and values in capoeira are more or less universal and thus make the diffusion of capoeira possible.

Good times or bad times, everything in this world goes with time, camará.

³⁷ Cummings, Jr. (2003) cited in the report of the U.S. Department of State (2005)

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