

## **In search of a metaphor: the hybridization and re-contextualization of the capoeira microcosm\***

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### **Resumo**

Capoeira é uma arte marcial desenvolvida por escravos africanos durante a era colonial no Brasil. Os escravos eram proibidos de aprender ou ensinar a lutar. Estes escravos, em sua busca por liberdade, desenvolveram um jeito de disfarçar suas técnicas de combate dos senhores de engenho como uma dança ritual ao utilizar música, assim evoluindo para uma nova forma de performance marcial. Os donos das *plantations* empregaram várias formas de controle social sobre seus escravos. Eles separaram famílias e misturaram tribos que falavam diferentes línguas e que tinham uma longa história de conflitos entre eles. Isto frustrou quaisquer tentativas de cooperação e comunicação subversiva entre os escravos. Entretanto, a capoeira aumentou a interação harmoniosa entre as várias comunidades ao prover uma base comum, ou uma arena para tratar suas diferenças sem chamar a atenção dos senhores. Os fazendeiros, sem consciência da velada letalidade desta arte, cedo se encontraram incapazes de evitar que seus escravos escapassem literal e emocionalmente. Diferente de outras artes marciais, a capoeira não é abertamente agressiva; ela demonstra a natureza passiva-agressiva de um escravo oprimido. Nem abertamente agressiva nem conflitante, ela disfarça a malícia com paciência e sorri. Um capoeirista esperará até o momento oportuno para desferir o golpe fatal. A capoeira não é somente africana nem somente brasileira na origem, mas sim um híbrido cultural de um povo étnico forçado à migração e à escravidão. A capoeira tem sido bastante estudada na arena acadêmica.

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Apesar da ausência de manuscritos históricos e textos escritos que atestam quando e onde a capoeira se desenvolveu, proponho que pelo uso do modelo apresentado pelo etnólogo Clifford Geertz, pode-se lê-la como um texto cultural para descobrir seu desenvolvimento histórico assim como interpretar a mentalidade escrava a partir desta arte dramática. Assim, a partir da narrativa pessoal e da teoria etnográfica, mostrarei como a capoeira funciona como uma apropriada plataforma para o estudo intercultural de uma migração étnica abrupta e forçada.

Palavras chaves: Capoeira - Hibridismo - Performance - Comparação Cultural

## **Resumen**

Capoeira es un arte marcial desarrollada por esclavos africanos durante la época colonial en Brasil. Los esclavos eran prohibidos de aprender o enseñar a luchar. Estos esclavos, en la búsqueda de la libertad, desarrollaron una forma de disfrazar sus técnicas de combate de los señores de ingenio y presentaron la capoeira como una danza ritual al utilizar la música, evolucionando para una nueva forma de performance marcial. Los dueños de las plantaciones emplearon diversas formas de control social sobre sus esclavos. Ellos separaron familias y mezclaron pueblos que hablaban diferentes lenguas y que tenían una prolongada historia de conflictos entre ellos. Esto frustró cualquier tentativa de cooperación y comunicación subversiva entre los esclavos. Mientras tanto, la capoeira aumentó la interacción armoniosa entre las comunidades al proveer una base común o una arena para dirimir sus diferencias sin llamar la atención de los señores. Los señores de esclavos sin percibir la velada fuerza de esta arte, pronto se encontraron incapaces para evitar que sus esclavos escaparan literal y emocionalmente. Diferente de otras artes marciales la capoeira no es abiertamente agresiva. Ella revela la naturaleza pasiva/agresiva del esclavo oprimido. Ni abiertamente agresiva ni conflictiva, disfraza la malicia con paciencia y sonríe. Un capoeirista esperará el momento oportuno para dar el golpe fatal. La capoeira no es solamente africana ni solamente brasileña en el origen y sí un híbrido cultural de un pueblo étnico forzado a la migración y a la esclavitud. La capoeira ha sido estudiada en la esfera académica a pesar de la ausencia de manuscritos históricos y textos escritos que testimoniam cuando y donde la capoeira se desarrolló. Propongo el uso del modelo presentado por Clifford Geertz para ser leída como un texto cultural y descubrir su desarrollo histórico así como interpretar la mentalidad esclava en esta arte dramática. Así, a partir de la narrativa personal y de la teoría etnográfica mostraré como la capoeira funciona como una apropiada plataforma para el estudio intelectual de una migración étnica abrupta y forzada.



Palabras claves: Capoeira - Hibridismo - Performance - Comparación Cultural

### **Abstract**

Capoeira is a martial art developed by African slaves during the colonial era in Brazil. Slaves were prohibited from learning/teaching how to fight. These slaves, in their pursuit of freedom, developed a way to disguise their combat techniques from the plantation owners as “a ritual dance” by utilizing music and song, thus evolving into a new martial performance form. Plantation owners employed various forms of social control over their slaves. They separated families and mixed the tribes who spoke different languages and who often had a long history of conflict between themselves. This frustrated any attempts of cooperation and subversive communication amongst the slaves. However, Capoeira increased the harmonious interaction between the various communities by providing a common ground, or often an arena to “work” out their differences without drawing unwanted attention from the plantation owners. The plantation owners, unaware of the veiled lethality of this art, soon found themselves unable to prevent *their* slaves from both literal and emotional escape. Unlike most martial arts, capoeira is not directly aggressive; it demonstrates the passive-aggressive nature of an oppressed slave. Neither openly aggressive nor confrontational, it disguises malice with patience and smiles. A capoeirista will wait until the opportune moment to deliver the fatal blow. Capoeira is neither solely African nor solely Brazilian in origin but rather a cultural hybrid of an ethnic people forced into migration and slavery. Capoeira has been overlooked in the scholarly arena. Notwithstanding the lack of historical manuscripts and written texts as to when and where capoeira developed, I propose that using the model provided by ethnographer Clifford Geertz, one can read as a cultural text to uncover its historical development as well as interpret the slave’s mindset from this dramatic art. Thus from personal narrative and ethnographic theory, I will show how capoeira functions as an appropriate platform for the inter-cultural study of both a forced and abrupt ethnic migration.

Key words: Capoeira - Hybridism - Performance - Cultural comparison

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The breeze is warm and the sun bright. There is a faint sound of something I have grown familiar with, the *berimbau*, a one stringed bow instrument that has become indexical of capoeira. I follow the sound, until I turn the corner near the old cathedral in the



Pelorinho district of Salvador, where I find a *roda* in progress. This is a contemporary scene of capoeira being played in the heart of capoeira country. The performance itself is interesting enough to watch, but I came here to learn, to observe, to engage. I gradually build up a level of confidence to enter the *roda* at the foot of the orchestra. I mimic the gestures of crossing myself as I have watched the others do. My heart is racing, the *berimbau* dips and the game begins.

Capoeira is called a game, not a fight. The art is laced with mystery, trickery and deception. Even though it is a game, don't be fooled, I am very likely to get hurt. As my fear balances with nervousness, I smile at the prospect trying to conceal my apprehension. We begin... slow and intentional movements, interweaving, around each others bodies. Could this be the playful interpretation of slave and master? One oppressing and endangering, as the other gracefully tries to go with the flow and avoid being destroyed? My kick, slow, methodical, and graceful, skims the top of my opponents head as he ducks and elegantly responds with another attack. This binary relationship is capoeira. The movements exemplify the ambiguity and the daily life of the African Brazilian slave.

I see this in the movements, the philosophy, and the mentality of capoeira. In other locals, capoeira carries less of this threat; it really is just a game. But here in Brazil, it is more than a game... it is a way of life. It is an ambiguous interplay between oppressor and oppressed, between game and fight, friend and foe. "Thump" and someone chuckles. A foot smashes me in my stomach and I land in a pile on the feet of those watching, and I find it a bit difficult to breath. The guy I am playing with smiles at me and offers his hand, but I know that dirty trick... when I let my guard down and give him my hand he will head butt me, I've seen it a million times. I get back up and start at the beginning.

"Um facão bateu em baixo aê, a bananeira caiu!" they sing and the game goes on.



## **The methapor**

The arts, whether they be commercial arts such as banking, fine arts such as painting, culinary arts or performance arts such as capoeira, constitute a culturally specific metaphor or a microcosmic world view, a way to interpret the diverse and complex world around us. As described by Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, societies make sense of the abstract by representing them in "concrete experience." The "roda" is a microcosm of the Afro-Brazilian slave's experience. The trademark style of capoeira is the ebb and flow of its movements. The concept behind this is to go with the flow. It causes more damage to block the blows given by the opponent, so instead the capoeirista ducks or moves gracefully with the attack and counters it when appropriate. Taking a step back and remembering where this style comes from, one can see the methodology of a passive-aggressive slave. The slaves bear the burden of arduous work loads and cruelties by the slave masters. To fight openly and actively against their masters would reap a lethal backlash and bring more terror than good to the slave community. So, with the smooth rhythmic motions (due to the African cultural influence), the capoeirista, or slave, does not show his malice. The slave can not be openly defiant, or aggressive, but rather must go with the flow. He must always be aware, yet passive in his relations with his oppressors. He must keep his eyes open and focused on his oppressor at all times, being alert, waiting for the perfect moment when the slave owners guard is down, that split opportune second in which he can deliver the fatal blow and perhaps make his escape to freedom.

Cultural arts reflect life as they are reflected in life. The metaphor is a basic structure that functions as a society re-contextualizes the world around them to make sense of it. Capoeira, in this sense, is kinesthetic poetry. According to Victor Turner (1982, p.115), "the proximity of theater [performance] to life, while remaining at a mirror distance from it, makes it the form best fitted



to comment or 'meta-comment...'. Cultural expressions may be borrowed and acculturated, but they will none the less be re-contextualized in to the microcosm of the culture. Not to say that there will not be an exchange or a synthesis taking place between the two cultures...

As a form is picked up and re-contextualized into the new culture, the hybridization process takes place. That is the nature of the art metaphor; it is reapplied and re-contextualized as it moves across time and space. Hybridization is not a one way process. Hybrid culture is not a "particular" mucked up with an "other" or infused unilaterally, but rather a dialectical synthesis incorporating parts of both cultures.

Rich in history and ritual, capoeira is a cultural text kinesthetically portraying the mindset of the Afro-Brazilian slave. This particular hybridization took place during the colonial era in Brazil, when slaves from various African nations mixed with the Europeans and the natives of Brazil. Using the image of an hour glass, the top half is wide and encompassing, collecting all into one focused center. For capoeira this center was Brazil. However, there is great debate over the history of capoeira. Many capoeira scholars and practitioners alike are in disagreement as to where capoeira began and who can authoritatively represent capoeira. The shrouded history of capoeira is due in part to the burning of all documents relating to the "...lamentable institution which paralyzed for many years the development of the society..." this was done in an attempt to destroy all evidence of slavery in the history of Brazil. This resolution signed by the Minister of Finance Ruy Barbosa on December 15, 1890, is commonly believed to have been an "economic maneuver" so as to avoid re-compensating the slave owners for their losses after the abolition (ALMEIDA, 1986, p. 4). There is no doubt that capoeira is greatly influenced by African culture, but capoeira is a product of circumstance. The slaves under their conditions, along with the various cultural exchanges that took place among the Africans, Indians, and Europeans, as well as the locations and situations of this center, are what gave way to the art



of capoeira. As anthropologist Thomas A. Green well noted African American culture is neither so simple as a reaction to bondage, nor a straightforward transplantation of unaltered Africanisms to the New World. Instead, the products of the African Diaspora in the Americas bear the marks of both their origins and the forces encountered in the Western Hemisphere (GREEN, 2003, p. 136).

As it was seen by the plantation/slave owners, capoeira was performed as a ritual dance with interweaving movements and rhythmic motions. But disguised behind the music and laughter, the slaves were training to fight and defend themselves against their oppressors. Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of the "front stage and back stage" is present in the roda. The very essence of capoeira is a correlation between front and back stages. On one level the front stage is composed of smiling faces and playful eccentricities in their movement. The back stage lies behind the smiles in subtle communication, and is often unseen by the casual spectator. Mestre Bimba, one of the most famous capoeira masters once said that "capoeira is deception."

The "roda" is a microcosm of the ambiguous relationship between players and a mirror of the ambiguity of historical and social structure macro realities.

### **Organic versus hybrid culture: re-contextualization and the hawaiian roda**

The cultivating factors that allowed for capoeira becoming what it is today are indeed a hybrid process. I would like to explore by way of the international capoeira experience as capoeira is re-contextualized and performed in various cultures around the world with particular interest in the Hawaiian Islands. The United States was introduced to capoeira during the late seventies and early eighties by the hands of Jelon Viera and Bira Almeida. Capoeira, though increasingly gaining popularity, has in contrast to other martial forms, somehow avoided the mass commercialization typical of



the commercial American mindset. This, I believe, is due in part to the resonance American capoeiristas experience within the art and its subtle defiance of the norm.

A North American roda is quite different from that of a Brazilian roda, simply for the very reason that the Capoeiristas are different. Their social situation is different. The North Shore of Hawaii, for example, is located in the “country,” on the opposite side of the island from Honolulu. The roda is a very jovial and social game, one of amusement. Participants play and do not concern themselves that they might be struck down, for the other player will pull the kick before it actually lands and hurts the player. There is little to no malice in the game. If one, especially a neophyte, is struck hard it is followed by a stream of apologies, the game seems to be placed on pause until all is well and the friendship between the two players is reconfirmed. The true test of skill on the North Shore is not to land appropriate strikes, but rather to exercise control over the body, the game, and technique while making it look aesthetically appealing and without causing harm to either player.

These differences became painfully apparent to me as I conducted my comparative research in the north-eastern state of Ceará, Brazil. While training with my Brazilian instructors, they would constantly tell me to duck or *esquiva*, however, due to the habits formed on the North Shore where there is no real danger of being hit, when tricked up I would stand there as if to say “whoops... checkmate. You got me” while smiling. This ended very quickly as my instructor struck me a few times in the head and face, and did not apologize afterwards.

Keep in mind that this friendly, relaxed, and relatively non-aggressive style is unique to the North Shore of Hawaii, where life is relaxed and easy going. This is a place where people ride bikes to work, stop along the way to watch the ocean, and driving takes place at a third the usual speed. Most of the population surfs and only works enough to support their surfing, which may explain why some find resonance with the non-aggressive counter culture embodied in capoeira. The North Shore is historically a fishing and



farming area. Thus the laid back, easy going mentality can partially be attributed to the environment in which the culture developed. The fertile environment allows for some ease in the pace of life. The take it or leave it non-consequential mentality that dominates the North Shore may be attributed to the surf watch or fishing lifestyle where waiting for the tides is a way of life.

Less than an hour's drive away in down town Honolulu the game is quite different, where there is a semi-urgent lifestyle, similar to that found in most metropolitan centers. I use semi-urgent in that this city is considerably more relaxed and laid back than just about any other American city. The "down town" roda is filled with more aggression, which can be expected from those living in a city having to look out for one's self. There is a roda that takes place every month between all of the groups on the island. Here, these groups play together in front of the "Duke" statue on Ala Moana Blvd. These Hawaiian-American rodas involve at least three different schools on the island and there is camaraderie between them. "We are friends because we are capoeiristas," is their maxim. The game played by each member of a particular group reflects the mentality and cultural nuances of the group, which is in turn a reflection of the culture in which it is found. The urban capoeiristas on the island have a different outlook than those on the North Shore. For example, they are all strongly affiliated with their particular schools, like Senzala, or Capoeira Hawaii. They play a bit more aggressively and for that reason very few of the North Shore students participate in this roda. The North Shore is dominated by ABADA, a traditionally strict and formal school known for its aggressive behavior, yet the Capoeiristas on the North Shore don't reflect this mentality nor do they seem to care about what school they are in. As far as they are concerned they play capoeira because capoeira is a part of who they are, ABADA just happens to be in their neighborhood.

The instructor for ABADA-Capoeira on the North Shore is frequently caught up in a liminal position. She, a Brazilian herself, has lived on the North Shore for around a decade, and has as a



result adopted many of the cultural traits. Her teaching style has gradually reflected the North Shore mentality. She is more relaxed than her counterparts in Brazil. However, when she has spoken or interacted in some way with the school's Mestre (president) or Mestrandos (comparable to a vice-president), her deportment reverts to a Brazilian style instruction and her liminal status of cultural conflict arises. She becomes noticeably more aggressive and demanding of the students. This sudden shift in composure often results in students becoming offended or uncomfortable in the altered setting and as a result leave the group.

The North Shore is not without its Brazilian influence. From the areas of Sunset to Pupukea along the main surf breaks on the island, the area is highly populated with Brazilians, many of whom come seasonally for the surf. There is also a more permanent congregation which has taken up residence there. Of those Brazilians many of them come to play with the North Shore group, and they do so with the same take it or leave it mentality. With this, there are additional cultural exchanges taking place. It is possible that they may have already had similar cultural traits, in that they carry some of the surfer mentality with them, or they may become acculturated with the dominant social structures of the North Shore. Some Brazilians often come to the roda looking for some piece of Brazil to remind them of home while others have practiced the art before and are interested in participating. The reasons are as varied and unique as each of the individuals. Those who are new and just looking for a piece of Brazil immediately pick up on the cultural nuances of the North Shore mentality, where as those who trained earlier in Brazil, still hold on to the Brazilian way of playing until they too adopt the traits or leave from frustration. It is interesting to note that when someone from Brazil tries to come over and correct the "vision of the game," the aggressive tendencies of the Brazilian roda may last for a while, but some how the vision always returns to the North Shore way. This aggressive nature seems to push some of the practitioners away and is in many ways contradictory to the overall mentality of the North Shore. When an



outsider plays aggressively, many of the capoeiristas are taken aback and are unsure as to how to respond. Those who have had experience with a Brazilian roda, or those from Brazil, typically are the ones who jump in and either calm it back down or answer the call for a more elevated game. There is also a sense of authority in regards to the Brazilian that has previously played capoeira in Brazil compared to those of the North Shore. Some of the North Shore capoeiristas have been playing for upwards of 6 years. While not much in comparison to many Brazilians, it seems that those Brazilians who have only played for two to four years still claim authority over those of the North Shore with five or six years experience. There is a mentality of one year in Brazil is equal to three or four elsewhere. Brazil still functions as the center in capoeira while outside of Brazil is the obvious periphery, a veritable Mecca where every "true" capoeirista must visit at least once.

When considering centers and peripheries, one has to account for legitimacy. Under certain analytical lenses, these positions become fully charged with heavy political, social, and cultural ramifications. The history of capoeira and its migration reflects this. Many scholars claim that capoeira began in Africa and was brought by the slaves to the New World. If that was the case then Brazil at one time was a periphery that has since evolved into a center. There is a privileged position awarded to the center. However, whether organic or hybrid, the arts practiced in a community reflect the collective mindset. The metaphor and the performance powerfully and richly convey the worldview of those who perform the art. Though the art may vary from location and epoch, the plasticity and re-contextualization is what gives credence to the metaphor. These metaphors serve as meta-social commentaries. Cultural expressive performances are collective metaphors, which when re-contextualized in different times and spaces, becomes a hybrid culture, and an equally valid microcosmic experience. However, I have made my pilgrimage twice.



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