

The Perception of Time in Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Angola

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A B S T R A C T

This paper describes the form in which capoeira Angola practitioners perceive the concept of “The Past” as a category that involves a peculiar way of conceiving temporality. Capoeira Angola players assume themselves as preserving a direct connection with what they call African origins and with slavery in Brazil, mainly expressed through narratives and performance. In this way, Capoeira Angola is conceived as a practice that extols and recreates “the past”, and negates the future. Therefore, practitioners seem to reject the notions of coexistence in time between themselves and other subjects where a shared present is constantly denied. However, innovation and change exist and capoeira practitioners stay in an instable environment where their appeal to tradition is constantly challenged by the social transformation occurring in the city of Bahia.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Africa, Slavery, Capoeira Angola, Past, Coevalness, Tradition

How to refer to this article

Sergio G. Varela, The Perception of Time in Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Angola, 2008, *omertaa*, journal for applied anthropology, <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0045.pdf>

Introduction

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines fight with playfulness. Created by slaves in Brazil during the nineteenth Century in the cities of Salvador (indistinctly called also Bahia, the name of the state) and Rio de Janeiro (Soares 1999), Capoeira has been in the middle of an endless academic and discursive debate about its African origins and its development throughout the Twentieth Century (Röhrig 2005). Despite the academic and historical disputes, what is a fact is that in the decades of 1930 and 1940, two different styles of this Martial Art emerged, namely, Capoeira Regional, and Capoeira Angola. Since then, both styles have maintained an ambiguous relationship marked sometimes by antagonism and divisions, in Brazil and abroad.

The two styles imply two different projects and in the case of my research this was exclusively focused on my involvement during one year of fieldwork in Salvador with members of the Angola style. In this sense, whatever I say about capoeira comes from the limited scope of the Angola perspective and its practitioners.

Capoeira Angola takes its name, apparently from Edison Carneiro, a Brazilian intellectual who in 1933 opposed and differentiated this type of capoeira from the “sportive” new one that was emerging in the city, called Regional (Carneiro 1977). Carneiro said that capoeira should be called Angola because it resembled the “true” and “original” capoeira supposedly practiced in Africa. He was the first intellectual who linked capoeira to an African origin in an academic level.

During the next three decades and until the present day, capoeira Angola has experienced innumerable changes. The discourses about origins and history have been divided between “serious academic” works made by intellectuals, and those labelled as “mythical narratives” created by the practitioners. The way of performing capoeira has also suffered enormous transformations and its popularity in Brazilian society has experienced different cycles: from expansion in the forties, fifties, and sixties, to decadence and almost extinction in the seventies, and finally re-emerging in a revitalized manner from the eighties until the present.

In this paper I would like to address the way in which the so-called “mythical past”, described by historians and mestres alike, develops and how it symbolizes an ambit that links capoeira with a perception of time that seems to challenge its present situation of modernization in a more general context of popularity and social change in the Bahian society. Summarizing, the question is how practitioners conceive the practice of capoeira as the construction of a time that implies also a different kind of experience that defies and cuts the linearity of a calendar time shaped in the form of a distinctive cosmology.

Origins: The Evocation of “Africa” in Capoeira Angola and the Main Narrative About it

When someone practices capoeira Angola in Bahia, the theme of Africa is recurrent. Mestres, (teachers in Portuguese) are considered subjects that are responsible for the transmission of knowledge. Such transmission is basically transmitted via the learning of bodily movements. However,

bodily movements are also provided with symbolic meanings that are expressed through narratives that refer to capoeira origins and evolution of the game (practitioners call to the practice of capoeira “jogar capoeira”, to play capoeira).

Since the new African revivalism experienced in Salvador in the early eighties, the references to Africa are recurrent in different circles of Bahian society and it has had also a strong impact in Capoeira Angola. The city of Salvador is 80% Afro-Brazilian and it encompasses a multicultural environment that is marked by abysmal socio-economic, racial, and religious contrasts that makes the city a place of inequality.

The cultural differences and the Afro-Brazilian presence create discourses and practices that mainly denote, on the one hand, discrimination to any reference to Blackness from the “white, mulatto” minority which rules the State, and on the other hand an opposition from Black organizations and groups against the instances in power.

Capoeira Angola belongs to this socio-cultural context where an evocation to Africa is part of the daily discourses that practitioners consider as “cultural resistance against their oppressors”. Mestres talk incessantly about Africa as something that definitely has temporal implications, as a place where they can retrace the steps of their ancestors. Almost all mestres are Afro-Brazilians and even those who are considered as “whites” think that their origin as performers of capoeira is connected through an unbroken chain back to Africa.

However, their narratives have been dismissed often by intellectuals, especially historians, and pointed out as falsely and imaginary Afrocentric conceptions that tell more about a Black ideology than to real facts. Putting aside the discussion whether those narratives are true or not, the importance is that narratives exist and they form part of the cosmological explanation of time devised by Capoeira players. It is in this sense that we need to take the evocations of Africa seriously.

Since 1940 when Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (known as Mestre Pastinha) codified the Angola style, there were different theories that suggested that some rituals in Africa might be the forefathers of capoeira, and possibly some ethnographic descriptions of games in Angola were the proofs that could validate the existence of capoeira in Africa. The main theory was that of the N’golo or the Zebra Dance. The N’golo theory was based on a series of descriptions made by the traveller Neves e Sousa (cited by Röhrig 2005: 49),

which were reproduced by the academic Camara Cascudo (Cascudo 1967), later narrated by Mestre Pastinha, and finally adapted in the eighties by one of the most charismatic leaders Pedro Moraes Trindade (Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho 1989).

I reproduce here, the fragment, cited by Röhrig, which accompanied the illustrations of the original book by Neves de Souza about the N'golo:

N'golo, the Zebra Dance, is possibly the origin of the capoeira the fighting dance of Brazil. It is danced at the time of the 'Mufico', a puberty rite for the girls of the Mucope and Mulondo regions. The object of the dance is to hit your opponent's face with your foot. A rhythm for the dance is beaten by clapping hands, and anyone who attempts a blow while outside the marked arena is disqualified. The 'Angolan capoeira' in Brazil also has its special rhythm, which is one more reason to believe that it originates with the N'golo. N'golo means 'zebra', and to a certain extent the dance originates from the leaps and battles of the zebra; the blow with the feet while the hands are touching the ground is certainly reminiscent of the zebra's kick (Röhrig 2005: 49).

According to some mestres, the N'golo is the evidence of the African origin of capoeira, and nowadays, many of the most important groups in Salvador have zebras as their symbols and they often remind students that capoeira has African origins and the N'golo is its ancestor. In this sense evocations to Africa become personification in time of a practice (capoeira) that considers itself as establishing a direct connection to its ancestors. Mestres will often state that capoeira is a millenarian practice and traces its origins back in time to thousands of years and that it has a very long tradition. In this sense, they will always indicate that capoeira Angola is the "mother of all capoeiras" and the only "traditional" one, the closer to Africa and the purer and less polluted by foreign influences.

The temporal connotations displayed by these statements have a repercussion in the way capoeira Angola is symbolised. For mestres, the assumption of being ancestral, makes capoeira a timeless practice that preserves its essence, its past throughout the present. "Africa", in this sense serves as an instrumental symbol (Turner 1968) that seems to condense the whole cosmos for Angola players. A dense concept that avoids a specific reference to a particular place, an empty term that because of its lack of specificity it is fruitfully filled with all the possible evocations of Ancestry. With no specification other than the N'golo,

which unfortunately has never been corroborated ethnographically by anthropologists, the reference to Africa is constantly placed in a time already lost.

Capoeira practitioners mention that it is difficult, if not implausible to trace in the present all the links of capoeira back to its African origin. However, it is possible to locate "patterns" in African cultural manifestations, such as rituals in Congo or Angola; practices that according to many Mestres, from one way or another still can shed light on the origins of the martial art.

In this way, the past is effortlessly searched, re-enacted, and perceived by practitioners as a past which can be always recovered through the daily practice of capoeira. By means of performance, capoeira players bring to the present a new version of the past and a confirmation of the "tradition" they are obliged to follow.

Slavery and the Formation of Capoeira

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the city of Salvador was the capital of the Portuguese empire in the New World and it experienced an increasing number of slaves coming from Africa. Slaves who were used in the sugar cane plantation, and distributed all along the colony to replace the labour force that indigenous populations failed to provide. Slave trade was significant in the construction of the city and in the exploitation of natural resources. In this way, Brazil became perhaps the biggest importer of slaves in the world.

Slavery played a huge role in the conformation of capoeira. Mestres indicate that slaves brought capoeira from Africa to Brazil. According to some narratives I collected, practitioners portray slaves as always active and rebellious, resisting injustice, fighting against their oppressors in Bahia, always active agents in their fight against exploitation. The narratives describe slaves as subjects that brought their culture and religion from Africa and that they reproduced it in Brazil. One narrative by a famous mestre mentions that slaves needed to find "spare time" while working, or on Sundays when they presumably were allowed to rest. Some of these slaves knew N'golo or other martial arts from Central Africa and they gathered in the sugar cane plantations to fight. Some of them were very aggressive and their masters did not see with good eyes these reunions that seemed to cause only problems, so they prohibited open fights between slaves.

According to mestres's narratives, slaves never stopped fighting. Because they were no longer able to fight in the open because of their rebellious attitude, they devised a

new way to do it: they disguised it through a game format. They stopped fighting when the overseers made inspections in the sugar cane plantations and instead, they simulated a game based on kicks and head-butts. However, slaves needed to find a solid terrain to perform their fights and some of them went to the bushes to train or to defy other opponents. From the mestres' point of view, these bushes or type of grass was called Kapueira. In this sense, Joao Pequeno, one of the most famous teachers in Bahia, disciple of Mestre Pastinha, said in an interview that the word capoeira comes from the mato, the bushes where slaves practiced capoeira.

He stated that when overseers looked for slaves, women told them "oh! Master, the men are dancing in the bushes, in the Kapueira". This association seems to be the standard interpretation of the origins of the word.

Mestre Moraes, one of the most prominent leaders of capoeira in the last twenty-five years, mentions that slaves not only used this new disguised fight for fun, but they also used it against their oppressors. Capoeira, in his version, was a weapon to challenge power and to conspire against the Masters and to make upheavals. The same narrative says that slaves formed Quilombos, towns populated by free slaves. During the well-known rebellion of Palmares in the seventeenth century, Moraes is sure that its main protagonist, Zumbi, used capoeira as a self-defence weapon and that many of the members of his Quilombo knew capoeira. Later, when slave trade was totally abolished in 1888, freed slaves moved into the cities and brought with them their capoeira.

Slaves seemed to define in this formative period the idiosyncrasy of capoeira. Mestres believe that the way people perform the Angola style nowadays still keeps elements from slavery like the way someone moves and fights. Capoeira is an activity that implies kicks, leg sweeps, and head-butts to attack an opponent, although blows and the use of hands are banned. In this sense, the ideal way to defend oneself is to follow the attack of an opponent and to escape from it and fight back. This avoidance of using hand blows as a weapon is interpreted by practitioners as a symbol of disguise. At the same time the use of acrobatic movements served the purpose of hiding violent intentions. In this sense, deception had a significant role in the definition of game strategies.

Negating the present, reluctance to innovation and social change

The reference to slavery, similar to the evocation of Africa, makes capoeira Angola an activity consciously linked by its practitioners to a distant past. In action, capoeira players

seem to perform the past, the so-called mythological explanation. For many mestres, capoeira is a ritual that fixes a temporality in the present and this is what they call "tradition". It is a time where the future seems to lack of a strong force, it is not absent but it remains suspended and the intensity focuses more in the opposite direction. It goes to an intensity of the time lost and consumed by history. In the present, mestres try to re-symbolize the past, to re-capture its essence in performance. This is why many players consider capoeira not only a martial art or a game but also a ritual, a kind of ceremonial communion with their ancestors.

The implication of an enactment of the past, performed by capoeira practitioners seems to contrast with the idea of coevalness mentioned by Johannes Fabian (Fabian 1983). Fabian has indicated that coevalness means the attitude and existence of a common time where anthropologists and native people alike live as contemporaries. Fabian mentions that anthropological discourse has incurred in a denial of coevalness by mixing and misunderstanding a distance in space with a distance in time. He says: Beneath the bewildering variety, the distancing devices that we can identify produce a global result. I will call it denial of coevalness [*italics in the original*]. By that I mean a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent (s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse... (Fabian 1983: 31).

Fabian says that in terms of discourse and production of knowledge, anthropology has failed to bridge the gap between the analyst and the Other, having as a consequence the abolition of a common shared interculturality.

Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse; it is a science of other men in another Time. It is a discourse whose referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject. This 'petrified relation' is a scandal. (Fabian 1983: 143)

Although I agree completely with Fabian in the sense that anthropology has denied the existence of a contemporary relationship between the Other and the analyst, and has incurred a moral and political misrepresentation of Otherness as encapsulated and distantly absorbed in a different time, I think Fabian has obviated and taken for granted the existence of a "real" time where cultural differences could be overcome by positioning human beings in a neutral temporal referential basis.

My opinion is that the idea of coevalness works only from the anthropologist's perspective and cannot be generalised because members of other cultures do not share such as-

sumption of a unique common time. For instance, *Mestres* of capoeira conceive themselves as being the embodiments both of tradition and of an African mythical past, and they clearly deny any idea of a possible belonging to the same present than the anthropologist. From a *mestre's* perspective, an anthropologist is not capable of accessing the past because he is not part of that tradition. From a native perspective, the anthropologist belongs to the academic and intellectual world and, because he is a foreigner, he is characterised as rich and important because he has plenty of free time to travel to Brazil and be involved only in capoeira, without having to worry about getting a job.

From an anthropologist perspective, this does not mean that one should abandon the attitude of coevalness in the relationship to the other. As Fabian has pointed out, "Anthropologist's other is ultimately other people who are our contemporaries" (Fabian 1983: 143). I would only add to his phrase "but do not expect that the other will conceive you as contemporary with him". It is in this dialectical discrepancy that the anthropologist should acknowledge a coeval situation with the other but also "at the same time" the possibility of the rejection of such assumption by the native peoples or his informants.

The examples given about African remoteness and the presence of slavery in the practice of contemporary capoeira Angola, says much of people who do not seem to bother if someone tells them that their practice is an old fashion thing, an atavism. On the contrary, *mestres* will emphasise the "traditional" character of their acts, they will even overdo this fact and they will tell to their students that they need to learn how to behave and fight like a slave, like a proper ancient African.

Temporality seems to play a huge rule in the conformation of the characters of the game. Another example of this attempt to bring the past to the present in an intact form is the use of ritual knives and formal clothes in performances. *Mestres* believe that after the abolition of slavery, capoeira moved to the cities, and was practiced by freed slaves and the lower class society. In this sense, capoeira became urban and it underwent transformations that made capoeira more violent and related to gangs, the so-called *Maltas* in Rio de Janeiro (Soares 2001). In the beginning of the New Republic, capoeira was formally banned by the government and stated a series of punishments to those people practicing the art of vagrancy or capoeira. In Bahia, the situation was not so different; ruffians, pimps, rogues, and marginal people who took the streets of Salvador during the night were associated with the practice of capoeira. They were responsible for gang gatherings, and they added the musical ensemble from

drums and dances existing in the streets, which nowadays is one of the strongest elements in the performances. *Mestres* says often that capoeira in the first decades of the twentieth century was more violent and people used weapons such as knives and sticks. Fishermen who took their best clothes to perform capoeira in the docks or in special festivals where they showed their skills accompanied by alcohol and women normally ended up in quarrels with the police and with other practitioners. It was in those occasions that capoeira assumed a violent character.

Therefore, *mestres* in the present try to keep part of this violent past alive by performing games with knives, silk scarves, and the use of white suits as an etiquette dress code. It is curious that they seem also selective about what elements of their "ancestrality" seem to be pertinent nowadays. For example they no longer foment the drinking of alcohol during performances and they retrieved the gatherings to academies and appearance in public is restricted to some special dates in the calendar of the city. Nevertheless, again, we find elements that strive to connect the past with the present in something that *Mestres* call the preservation of tradition. According to them tradition is this precious link to the past and to the way they think capoeira should remain in spite of the development of society. In this way, practicing capoeira Angola has not much to do apparently with inventiveness and innovation. On the contrary, it is idealised as an ancestral practice that needs to keep away new ways of codification. However, this seems to enter into a paradoxical situation because the effort to keep new things out of perspective does not always happen. In spite of the attempts to eclipse any kind of "modern" patterns, capoeira Angola has suffered enormous changes and it is thanks to these changes that it has been able to adapt itself to other emerging capoeira styles and to a changing Bahian society. Although *mestres* seem reluctant to introduce any association with the future and with the introduction of new tricks, new instruments, and new clothes, they need to negotiate and to "invent" strategies to include in their temporality.

If we were able to trace in temporal intensities the quality of time perceived by Angola players, we would find that they do not intend to project actions to a future time. On the contrary, they seem to use the present as a way of connecting something that is apparently lost with something that can be rescued, and projected in the present moment, a kind of past in the present and a past in the future. The idea of future then has to do more with strategies for a challenge that needs to be predicted. The term "preservation of tradition" widely used in academies, evokes a negation of future adjustments and a strategy of resistance against alien agency.

Facing cultural change

In a general perspective, capoeira Angola groups in Salvador, Bahia are facing a dilemma with what they call “modernity”. On the one hand, the increasing popularity of capoeira outside Brazil has gained more and more adepts in the last twenty-seven years than in all its documented history. Mestres, and particularly from the Angola style, keep a busy schedule travelling abroad, mainly to Europe and the United States. This constant mobilization produces a new sort of incomes and a very complex network of alliances and connections, which help them to make from capoeira a living. On the other hand, locally, it means also a massive visit of foreigners to the academies in Bahia and an increasing economical and social interest in tourism. Mestres and local students have a very special way of perceiving foreigners and their attitudes towards them would deserve a detailed analysis that unfortunately I cannot provide here. However, talking about temporal agency, the relationships between mestres and foreign tourism is an example of the existing conflicts between mestres’ passion for preserving their past, and the constant ‘menace’ caused by foreign practitioners. In this sense a mestre needs foreigners and tourists economically but at the same time he does not seem convinced they could truly destabilise the whole corpus of traditions that capoeira Angola has created. In this sense, tourists are undermined in the academies and not considered completely serious players. However, foreign players who have been involved in capoeira for at least ten years have brought also the possibility of new international links, which help mestres to readapt many of their precepts or to even reinforce their attitudes toward tradition and becoming more inflexible in their norms.

From an anthropology of time perspective, the negation of coevalness brought to the table by the own natives, makes the discussion of anthropologists and “informants” as subjects belonging to a contemporary, equal time, more complex than the way Fabian imagined. It could face the risks in anthropology of making the natives completely alienated by the past, pertaining to a different period and portraying them as part of a world lost or as inferior. In this paper I tried to show that a response to the natives’ reluctance to coevalness was to take their assumptions and narratives as seriously as any other statement they told me and to follow the thread of their concerns. If they were interested in making themselves as belonging to an ancestral past or if they think that Africa and Slavery are topics that are present and that are reproduced any time a capoeira Angola performance takes place, this is the way the present is shaped by their perceptions. It is in this sense that the past in the present of the Mestres is a way of making justice to their coevalness and to our belonging to a common world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, time in capoeira Angola is a time that takes the past as a primordial aspect in the configuration of actions an identity. References to Africa bring a solid background and a continuation of a practice that mestres conceive as primordial. A special myth of origin and the need to keep actions in a very limited range of innovation has been seen by many intellectuals and mestres from other styles as an example of orthodoxy. However, changes and modifications exist. There is a selection of aspects and things to be remembered and there is a clear division between what is socially acceptable from the past and what is not. Changes in style and in the way of performing stay in a dialectical position with the longing for purity and solidification of the past. It is in this tension that capoeira strives to keep itself updated as well as it strives to concede only minor changes in form but not in substance. It is only seeing the future as a continuation of the past that one understands why mestres avoid any reference to coevalness, claiming the existence of a differentiated instance of time.

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