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EMBODIMENT OF CAPOEIRA SKILLS

Urška Habjan¹

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Abstract

This article is the result of twenty-one months of fieldwork among the capoeiristas in Brazil, primarily in the city of Salvador, between 2003 and 2013. The fieldwork methodology was based on participant observation. It also included conducting interviews and informal conversations, listening to life stories of locals, and writing a diary. My personal experiences within capoeira and the improvement of my own skills enabled me to better grasp what capoeira is about. By participating, I more fully understood the corporeal strain and pleasure involved in this particular embodied practice.

The socio-economic situation of Brazilian society based on racial and gender discrimination enhances the cultivation of capoeiristic *habitus* and dictates the need for the acquisition of capoeiristic skills and attitudes in order to cope with, understand, and live within an unequal world. Capoeiristic *habitus* consists of knowledge, attitudes and skills enabling capoeiristas to stay in tune with the environment of lurking danger, to face with an ambiguous, unstable and uncertain environment. Capoeiristic *habitus* can be embodied early in life or learnt and acquired as a by-product of capoeira training. But it remains important whether the environment in which a capoeirista practises tolerates or inhibits the cultivation of capoeiristic skills.

Keywords: capoeira, embodiment, skills, body and mind

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Closed Body in Capoeira

Capoeira is a skilful bodily practice performed within a *roda* (wheel, circle). The *roda* is a circle of varying dimensions (depending on the setting), formed by the bodies of capoeira practitioners. Some of them play instruments, while others give the rhythm by acclamation. One sings solo, and the others respond in chorus. In the middle of the circle, two capoeiristas (capoeira practitioners) interact with and confront each other (in a more or less co-operative or competitive spirit). In the *roda*,

¹ Urška Habjan is PhD student of Anthropology

capoeiristas sometimes play the instruments, sometimes clap hands, sometimes perform their skills within the circle, and sometimes sing.

The term *roda* does not correspond only to the shape of the space (circle) where the happening takes place, but also refers to the performance itself (Lewis, 1992). For Reis (1997: 205), the *roda* is a ritual with rules, separating the right from the wrong, the allowed from the prohibited, and ethical from unethical behaviour. However, not all capoeiristas obey the rules, and these may vary among different *rodas*. I use the term *roda* to describe the regulated circle of participants who give the rhythm (by playing the instruments, clapping hands and singing) while two of them interact with each other within the circle. When using the term *roda*, I pay no special attention to whether the motion of those interacting with each other is perceived as playful or as a means of combat. In both cases, the confrontation, which emphasizes physical interaction between two capoeiristas, is called *jôgo de capoeira* (play/game of capoeira).

The basic dynamic of the *jôgo* can be described as interplay of attacks, escapes, counter-attacks, and *floreios* (refers to a flourish or decoration in the form of acrobatic elements, or to a stylistic variation of *ginga*). Capoeiristas learn different movements that serve as attacks and escapes, they learn how and when to use counter-attacks, and how to throw the other capoeirista on the floor. Learning a specific movement during trainings is a preparation for the *roda de capoeira*. In the *roda*, a capoeirista demonstrates his skills when attempting to use the most suitable technique in a specific situation. He¹ has the autonomy to use one of the existing moves, or to invent a new one to attack or defend the other's attack. In order not to be foreseen, he tries not to repeat the same movements. Rather he improvises and is creative. A capoeirista is therefore "not only a social figure, the product of a collective history, regulated by the distinctive rules of art which artistic outsiders flout to their cost, but also, as the processor of an artistic habitus, someone who can improvise and – within certain limits – even invent" (Fowler, 2000: 8). Improvisation and creativity are significant for physical contest, instrumental ensemble, and singing. In physical confrontation, improvisation and creativity do not refer only to the selection of fighting

¹ In order to simplify the language and alleviate reading of the text, I have used the generic masculine form throughout the article. Although capoeira was mainly performed by the male population until the 1980's, women are also practising it today. For this reason it would be more concise to use both forms: masculine and feminine. As my attempts to do that made reading of the text difficult, I decided to use only the masculine form when addressing a specific topic in general.

techniques, but also include the gestures and facial expressions used for deception of the other capoeirista.

Jôgo de capoeira emphasizes the importance of being closed. The principle of *corpo fechado* (closed body) refers to the necessity to close the body in order to keep it untouchable (beyond the reach of any kind of attack) and protected from all harm. It includes the ability to perceive external danger and protect oneself. In the capoeira game, on the practitioner's level, it relates to one's skill of 'reading' the other's intentions and hiding one's own. Intentions can also be recognized by one's feelings expressed through the surface of the body. It is recommended that a capoeirista conceal his mood and feelings, since they can make his intentions transparent.

In order to have a *corpo fechado*, a capoeirista needs to know how to perceive his environment. In other words, besides hiding own intentions, 'reading' the other, and knowing different techniques how to react properly to (potential) danger in the game, the most important skill in the game is the perception of potential dangers. Practitioners learn specific ways of observing and listening in order to recognize and identify the most important information in the environment. From that perspective, their bodies should be permanently opened to the world. Their bodies have to be simultaneously imperceptible and perceptive. Both can be learnt, since "any skill can be cultivated" (Carpenter, 1972: 20 cited in Downey, 2002: 449-500).

The process of embodiment of skills in capoeira is an ongoing process closely related to the learning of specific ways of perceiving and responding. Ingold argues that "the body *is* the human organism" and that "the process of embodiment is one and the same as the development of that organism in its environment" (Ingold, 2000: 170, italicized in the original text). Therefore, learning capoeira is neither an individual nor a complete process. It is continually engendered through interaction with others and the environment at large. Capoeiristas are constantly on the path towards perfection, which is, however, never fully achieved. The process of embodiment does not end, there is no final stage. By interacting with others in the game and observing others playing, there is always an opportunity for apprenticeship and improvement. In capoeira, the process of embodiment becomes a focus in itself.

Body Cultivation

Capoeira is a complex kinaesthetic practice and a particularly demanding form of embodied knowledge. It includes complex physical

tasks and techniques that presuppose extraordinary body co-ordination and delicate bodily control, since many potential motions have to be consciously mastered at once. The bodily techniques are so complex that each body part has to contribute to the overall movement. This means that the capoeirista has to have the whole body simultaneously under control.

Downey (2005b, 2010) explains that physical practices shape the development of a skilled body, and that skill development typically entails some degree of physiological change. He argues that cultivation of skill transforms human tissues, conditions the neurological systems, and sculpts the skeletons.

The study of embodied knowledge and its development in bodily practices suggests that gaining bodily skills requires more than 'knowledge', involving changes in physiology, perception, comportment, and behaviour patterns in unsystematic, diverse modes (Downey, 2010: S22).

For Downey, skill is not simply the 'embodiment' of 'knowledge', but rather physical, neurological, perceptual, and behavioural change of the individual subject so that he or she can accomplish tasks that, prior to enskillment, were impossible. For example, training in capoeira shifts the sensory channels that a person draws upon to balance, develops top-down techniques for relaxing muscles and diffusing tension, and fashions behavioural patterns that bring previously unnoticed sensory information to awareness (habits of looking around suspiciously, for instance) (Downey, 2010: S35-S36).

In the process of skill cultivation, a capoeirista's whole body goes through the process of bodily transformation in strength, flexibility, mobility, and manner of perception. Downey claims that "training may demonstrably affect physiological change in the brain, nervous system, bones, joints, sensory organs, even endocrine and autonomic systems" (Downey, 2010: S27). A capoeirista is transformed to be able to perform tasks for which he was frequently inapt. The transformation also includes acquaintance with perceptual skills (through the senses), which generate a particular mode of knowing and understanding of the world that is determined by social experiences.

Mauss (2006) argues that each society has its own habits regarding the ways men know how to use their bodies. He also stresses that these habits do not vary only between societies, but also among individuals. 'Techniques of the body' are divided and vary by sex (e.g., closing the

fist, punching, and throwing), by age (e.g., squatting), and by results of training (e.g., skills, competences). From that perspective, acquiring skills within capoeira can (re)determine the practitioners' 'techniques of the body'.

Bourdieu (1984) refers to 'techniques of the body' as inscribed power and dominating social relations, whereas Foucault (1980) regards 'techniques of the body' from the perspective of moral codes. I use the phrase 'bodily techniques' to refer to the inscribed postures, gestures, expression, and motion of the body of a specific social group, which can also be very individual, regarding a person's interactions. Such use of the phrase is similar to Burkitt's (1999). Brownell (1995) uses Mauss's 'body techniques' within her concept of 'body culture', which she defines as "everything people do with their bodies" and "the elements of culture that shape their doing" (Brownell, 1995: 10).

Following Bourdieu's (1984) definition of *habitus*, one could say that capoeiristas cultivate and embody a capoeiristic *habitus* that shapes their everyday behaviour. *Habitus* is the embodied knowledge and set of embodied dispositions (such as gestures, attitudes, and ways of being) that are acquired through lived practice, unconsciously embodied, and reproduced. Bourdieu (1984) explains that *habitus* is necessarily non-conscious, since bodily knowledge is acquired without intention or awareness.

Bourdieu (1984) analyses the *habitus* of different social groups¹, and writes that *habitus* reflects the social relations of the society in which they arise and tends to reproduce the social system of which it is a product. He argues that *habitus* is difficult to change, since it is unquestioned. This means that it reinforces social order and impedes social change. Burkitt (1999: 86) argues that dispositions should not be understood as mechanical reproductions of the social order in a mechanical fashion (as mechanical responses to a given situation), but as creations in the relationship between *habitus* and the context in which a person acts. They are a condition that may be expressed in certain circumstances. Robbins (2000: 187) refers to the phrase 'elective affinity' and, following Bourdieu, explains that dispositions are not fixed or intrinsic. Instead, a person can modify inherited dispositions by new choices. Robbins claims that there are parameters within which *habitus*

¹ Bodily disposition is specific to a certain social group. The members of a specific group are marked by their specific ways of standing, speaking, walking, feeling and thinking, by their lifestyle. Bourdieu (1984) refers to the inscriptions of the body as 'techniques of the body' which determine the individual to act in a given way. They are foundations for forms of behaviour and action in a certain context.

can be adjusted, and parameters that enable a natural process to be the consequence of affinity and choice.

Therefore, the generative structure of dispositions means that a person can produce original practices by acting through his dispositions. Novelty can be created because dispositions are transposable, meaning that dispositions learned in one context can be applied or adapted to actions in another. Bourdieu's notion of transposable dispositions and generative structures, by which people can reformulate their practical skills and knowledge according to the needs of different social contexts, means that innovative or heretical practices can emerge. Throughout history, this was also the case with the appearance of different capoeira schools and styles of playing the game.

According to my observations, I can only agree with Downey (2010: S33), who disagrees with Bourdieu's insistence that the *habitus* is a unified, single, simple generative principle that creates practice.

[T]he *habitus* for capoeira is actually a concrete set of perceptual-motor skills and modifications to the organic body. Different practitioners acquire them unevenly. Moreover, many skills take a long time to acquire because they actually necessitate physiological change: stronger muscles, greater flexibility, more acute perceptual-motor ability, and slowly developed, incrementally learned patterns of behaviour (Downey, 2010: S33).

Downey describes capoeiristic *habitus* as "a kind of streetwise savvy, an opportunistic eye, a gift for evasion and trickery, and a playful ability to overcome dangers in everyday life" (Downey, 2010: S31). For him, capoeiristic *habitus* is significantly associated with *malícia*.¹

Malícia would seem to be an ideal analogy to the *habitus*, even if it is learned later in life than everyday movements: class-based, embodied, flexible, social opportunities internalized, and admittedly opaque or immune to articulation as a philosophy even if practitioners were eloquently evocative (Downey, 2010: S32).

¹ The cunning principle of capoeira is related to the concepts of *malandragem*, *malícia*, and *mandinga* – Brazilian terms significantly linked with each other. These three interrelated concepts can, in the most general way, be translated as trickery, deception, and seduction (through body movement), respectively. All three terms label the manner of motion, behaviour, and activity. They are used to describe the philosophy of capoeira and the way of being in Brazilian society. They also describe a way of life, understanding, and dealing with the world. In other words, all three terms are used on a daily basis when describing the functioning of people in everyday life (and in capoeira), their characteristics, and the characteristics of Brazilian society as a whole.

Downey says that capoeiristas gain their cunning and savvy attitude toward life “primarily through imitation, along with bodily exercises and physical experimentation” (Downey, 2010: S22). Similarly, Nestor Capoeira (2002a, 2002b) argues that *malícia* cannot be taught or learned explicitly and methodologically, but is cultivated in *jôgo* through various interactions with different people. He says that *malícia* is a non-conscious and non-rational principle. It is a by-product of intentionally acquired movements and techniques. Like *malícia*, *malandragem* and *mandinga* are also not directly taught. They can be learned unintentionally and cultivated in the never-ending process of training and acquired through a lived experience within a particular environment. However, it should be added that different capoeira groups and different practitioners lay different emphasis on cunningness. And they also acquire the skill of cunningness unevenly.

Regular trainings and new experiences slowly transform the practitioner’s patterns of perception and attention, his motor skills, physiognomy, emotional reactions, and ways of interaction. A capoeirista cultivates and embodies capoeiristic *habitus* that emphasizes the necessity of being permanently attentive to several things at once. His skill of keen perception enables him to behave properly: in such a way that he avoids being tricked, trapped or caught in the moment of his openness.

That capoeiristas have their *habitus* is recognized in Brazilian society by saying that capoeiristas have their way of being (*jeito de ser*) or their capoeira way (*jeito de capoeira*). Their *jeito* (way) consists of knowledge, attitude, and skills enabling them to stay in tune with an environment of lurking danger. It enables them to cope with an ambiguous, instable and uncertain environment – not just in the *roda*, but also in daily life outside it.

Being Attuned to Social Life

Capoeira stresses a particular perception of the world through which capoeiristas apprehend physical phenomena and transmit cultural values. It uncovers the character of society and its pervasive and often covert values and attitudes that extend far beyond the realm of a game. This corresponds with Mauss’s (2006) argument that ‘bodily techniques’ can convey cultural, social, even national customs and values.

In the *roda*, permanent and circular movement, when all the senses function together, increases the possibilities of monitoring and examining the environment, improves perception and ameliorates the ability to

adapt to and take advantage of it. It enables one to collect various pieces of information and put them together. Similarly, the poverty and shifting conditions of survival in Brazilian society presuppose the necessity of constant searching (movement) and paying attention to potential dangers and opportunities.

The need for circular and unpredictable motion in capoeira correlates with Brazilian social reality, where the opportunities to succeed are limited due to social inequality based on race and gender discrimination. The importance of a keen perception in order to be able to take advantage of the current (but fading) situation is illustrated in the following popular capoeira song¹ composed by an unknown artist:

Solo: *O sim, sim sim, o não, não, não.* (O, yes, yes, yes, o no, no, no.)

Chorus: *O sim, sim sim, o não, não, não.* (O, yes, yes, yes, o no, no, no.)

Solo: *Mas hoje tem, amanhã não, mas hoje tem, amanhã não.* (But today there is, tomorrow there will not be, but today there is, tomorrow there will not be).

Chorus: *O sim, sim sim, o não, não, não.* (O, yes, yes, yes, o no, no, no.)

Solo: *Mas hoje tem amanhã não, olha a pisada de Lampião.* (But today there is, tomorrow there will not be, look at the steps of Lampião.)

Chorus: *O sim, sim sim, o não, não, não.* (O, yes, yes, yes, o no, no, no.)

This song captures the fundamental aspect of capoeira and life in Brazil in a simple way. The contradictory chorus verse *O sim, sim sim, o não, não, não* reflects the paradoxes of the game and life in general, and sheds light on the negotiation within them. The verse *Mas hoje tem, amanhã não* is about another contradiction and negotiation that relates to life in Brazil, suggesting its instability and transience. It clearly states that what is here today may not be here tomorrow. This can refer to

¹ Songs as presented in this article were frequently sung in the *rodas* in which I participated. I wrote down a song in the way I recorded it or learnt it. It should be noted that the 'same' song can be written down in different ways, since the soloist can improvise and adapt the lyrics of a song according to the happenings in the *roda*, whereas a chorus sings predefined lyrics. The lyrics of the soloist vary, particularly in those songs where the soloist enumerates different characteristics (for example, of a skilful capoeirista).

I found the lyrics of songs and their variations on different internet sites when I was searching for information about their authorship. If I found the name of a composer of a particular song, I noted his name and the address of the internet site where that information was found. In other cases, I simply wrote that the song was of an unknown author.

food, work, health, or anything else. Both verses can be related, in the capoeira context, to the interchanging opportunities for both capoeiristas and the necessity of using them opportunisticly. It means that a thought process must be developed in such a way that the capoeirista is able to recognize opportunities when they appear, and exploit them. Moreover, he has to be able to create opportunities. The final verse *olha a pisada de Lampião* refers to the famous bandit leader and folk hero, who roamed the arid interior of Northeastern Brazil in the early 20th century, stealing from both the rich and the poor. He is a personified contradiction symbolizing the interpersonal violence that arise as a response to the inequality in society.

From that perspective, *malícia*, *malandragem* and *mandinga*, as ways of being in the world, can be embodied early in life and are not only a by-product of capoeira training. They are associated with Brazilian social life in general. Capoeira as a 'bodily technique' is culture specific, which was also emphasized by all my informants. For them, capoeira is their national sport, identity, and symbol. They frequently expressed that capoeira is in the Brazilian blood (*está no sangue Brasileira*), that it is the Brazilian thing (*coisa Brasileira*), the people's thing (*coisa da gente*), and that it is theirs (*é nossa* 'is ours').

My entire family is practising capoeira. We have it in our blood. Everything we are doing is about capoeira. Capoeira means security in life. I managed to walk away from crime and drugs, and all those bad things that are outside. Capoeira saved my life. Capoeira is my life. Some Brazilians, already know how to perform capoeira when they are born, though nobody taught them. It is simply in our blood (Jair, teacher, interview, 2006).¹

I think that the inhabitants of Salvador learn capoeira more easily than people from outside the city. I think that the inhabitants of Salvador are accustomed to capoeira. They see it all the time, they know it. They easily visualize an image, and that facilitates their learning process. We live with capoeira. We also live in a very festive culture, focused on having fun. All this is incorporated in our bodies. We know how to *brincar* (play like a child) and *jogar* (play). Therefore, we from Salvador can learn capoeira more easily than those from the outside, especially those outside Bahia and outside Brazil (Carla, student, interview, 2006).

¹ The quotes from interviews are based on my own ethnographic fieldwork. Instead of using the real names of informants, I used pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. The informant's pseudonym is followed by information on his expertise (student or teacher), and how and when the quote was acquired.

Both quotes emphasize the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, those from the inside (Brazilians) and those from *de fora* (non-Brazilians). Those from the inside are said to have better opportunities to learn capoeira. Carla’s statement that she lives in a festive culture, confirmed by most of my informants, also shows a connection between the festivity of Brazilian culture and the nature of the capoeira game, which is also about playing (like a child) and having fun.

The prevalent attitude that is continually expressed in interviews and informal conversation, acknowledging that capoeira is Brazilian heritage, is also celebrated in capoeira songs. For example, the refrain of a song composed by an unknown artist goes as follows:

Chorus: *Isso é coisa da gente, ginga pra lá e pra cá, mexe o corpo ligeiro, a mandinga não pode acabar.* (This is our thing, do *ginga* here and there, move the body softly, *mandinga* should not be missing).

In another song by an unknown artist, the soloist explains what capoeira is, and the chorus repeats that capoeira is of the Brazilian colour.

Solo: *Esta no sangue da raça brasileira, capoeira.* (It is in the blood of the Brazilian race, capoeira.)

Chorus: *É da nossa cor.* (It is of our colour.)

Solo: *É cultura da raça brasileira.* (It is the culture of the Brazilian race.)

Chorus: *É da nossa cor.* (It is of our colour.)

Solo: *É uma luta brasileira.* (Capoeira is a Brazilian fight.)

Chorus: *É da nossa cor.* (It is of our colour.)

Solo: *Capoeira é uma dança brasileira.* (Capoeira is a Brazilian dance.)

Chorus: *É da nossa cor.* (It is of our colour.)

In the third song¹, composed by *professor* Capu, the solo singer tells some historical details about capoeira and describes the nature of the game. The chorus appraises the figure of *malandro* in capoeira and in Brazilian society in general:

Solo: *Malandragem só sai daqui, quando essa roda acabar, se o meu mestre disser lê ou se Cavalaria tocar. Capoeira é antiga arte, foi o negro inventando, me diga quem é brasileiro e não tem um pouco de malandro.* (*Malandragem* only leaves from here, when this *roda* finishes, if my *mestre* says “lê” or if Cavalaria is played. Capoeira is an ancient

¹ Source: <http://www.lettras.mus.br/professor-capu/1873876/>.

art, invented by the blacks, tell me who is Brazilian, and is not a little bit of a *malandro*¹).

Malandragem.

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

Solo: Capoeira.

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

Solo: *Na Bahia.* (In Bahia.)

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

Solo: *Na ladeira.* (On the slope.)

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

Solo: *Finge que vai, mas não vai, bicho vem e eu me faço de morto, mas se a coisa apertar, pra Deus eu peço socorro. Entro e saio sem me machucar, subo e desço sem escorregar, vou louvando o criador da mandinga, o malandro que inventou a ginga.* (He pretends to go, but he does not, the beast is coming and I pretend to be dead, but if things get tight, I ask God for help. I enter and leave without being hurt, ascend and descend without slipping, praising the creator of *mandinga*, the *malandro* invented *ginga*).

Malandragem.

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

...

Solo: *O sol faz o chão esquentar, calma moça, chuva vem esfriar, expressão do rosto da menina ao saber que essa é a minha sina. Bato forte não devagar, cuidado quando se levantar, berimbau já fez sua cantiga, coração me impulsiona pra cima.* (The sun heats up the ground, calm down girl; rain comes to cool things down, the expression on the girl's face, knowing that this is my fate. I hit hard, not slowly, being careful when getting up, *berimbau* already made his song, my heart urges me to get up.)

Malandragem.

Chorus: *Oi malandro, é malandro.* (Oh, *malandro*, is *malandro*.)

The lyrics of the song speak about contradiction, deception, and negotiation. They tell that *malandragem*, closely related to *ginga* (the base move) and *mandinga*, is the faith of Brazilian men and the Brazilian nation in general. For that reason, the capoeirista worships *malandro* (and the way of his being in the world), simultaneously relying on God's help.

A capoeirista's being in the world is demonstrated by rules that determine the proper way of thinking and behaving in the *roda de capoeira* and the *roda da vida* (*roda* of life). Both *rodas* are chronically

¹ *Malandro* is the person who is using the *malandragem*.

instable and fugitive. However, there is always a kind of optimism, a part of *malícia*. This attitude towards the world is well illustrated in the following verse of a capoeira song by an unknown artist: *Passar bem ou passar mal, tudo no mundo é passar, camará* (Good times or bad times, everything in the world will pass, friend).

Following Wacquant (2004), I argue that Brazilians are being born into a socio-economic environment that lays stress on the acquisition of certain skills and attitudes in order to become attuned to social life. The need for those skills and attitudes, which are, according to Wesolowski (2007: 227), interpreted as natural or innate qualities, encourages Brazilians to embody them. The Brazilians incorporate the capoeira values of *malandragem*, *malícia* and *mandinga* more willingly than non-Brazilians. Their daily practices (and daily life in general) enable them to develop a particular attitude and behaviour. Like participants in boxing (Wacquant, 2004), some Brazilians already bring to capoeira the skills acquired on the streets, while others start practising it to cultivate them in order to know how to recognize and behave in similar situations of deception and oppression. Due to the social circumstances, rich people in Brazil also have to cultivate the skills of permanent awareness and control. The elements of the capoeira game help them to cope with, understand, and live in an unequal world. This means that *habitus* is not necessarily non-conscious, as Bourdieu (1984) argues, at least not during the process of acquisition. Bodily knowledge can be acquired and later used with intention and awareness.

If we accept that capoeira embodies the Brazilian way of life, does that mean that non-Brazilians cannot incorporate it, as stressed by my informants? Can non-Brazilians acquire the Brazilian bodily knowledge with the intention to learn a specific bodily practice, the practice of capoeira in particular? Robitaille (2009), following DaMatta (1997), argues that playing capoeira allows foreigners to embody a central value of Brazilian society, i.e., *malandragem*, as a way of being in the world that is in close relationship to the functioning of the country.

It could be argued that *malandragem* presupposes a special state of mind that would enable one to see certain situations and act strategically with wit and cunning. However, an attention to embodiment in capoeira can reveal that this state of mind is not a previous disposition but that it is rather the concrete situations of the game that instill the practitioner with this way of facing the world (Robitaille, 2009: 6).

That means that 'a special state of mind' can be learned within a particular environment. Dispositions might equally develop from the

bodily practice a person wants to learn and potentially replace the existing dispositions, since “they may confront, even transform, key habits, postures, or characteristics of habitus” (Downey, 2010: S26). This can be confirmed by observation of different styles of playing capoeira. Some capoeiristas learn very fast how to be tricky and unpredictable in the game, whereas others may remain transparent even after many years of practising. In general, Brazilians seem to be more skilled in deception than non-Brazilians and those practicing the contemporary style.

From that perspective, the environment and the culture of society in general accelerate or inhibit the cultivation of particular skills. Capoeiristas often say that non-Brazilians need to cope with bigger problems when trying to learn capoeira. My informants frequently made fun of foreigners’ stiff bodies. In Brownell’s (1995) words, they were making fun of foreigners’ ‘body culture’. They claimed that the *ginga* of foreigners is obviously non-Brazilian. It is predictive, mechanical, systematic, and clumsy. For that reason, their style of playing can be recognized as non-Brazilian at first sight.

Ginga, as an embodied concept, is located particularly in the hips. It is mostly attributed to those who display corporal dexterity: Brazilian capoeiristas, soccer players, samba dancers, and mediums in *candomblé*. When performing *ginga*, one is supposed to be effortless and relaxed. As my informants often emphasized, non-Brazilians, labeled *de fora* or *gringos* (words with a negative connotation used for foreigners), are not able to swing their bodies in such a relaxed, fluid, and unpredictable manner.

Lewis (1992: 97) noticed that the word *gingar* (to swing) also occurs in common Brazilian usage in the form of *gingada*, which refers to the way a person walks or dances, especially in relation to the movement of the feet. Rodrigues (1987, cited in D’agostini, 2004: 8) describes the characteristics of the Brazilian way of walking: large steps, slumped shoulders, great balancing of arms and hips, exaggerated lateral tilt of the torso and head with every step. This kind of walking is prejudicially confused with the walking style of disordered people. It also associates the blacks with *malandragem* on the one side, and *malandros* with marginality on the other. According to Brownell (1995), the Brazilian way of walking, associated with *ginga*, reveals the Brazilian way of being in the world: The point is that something as automatic and seemingly trivial as one’s walking style expresses an entire orientation to the world. This orientation is simultaneously trained into the body with conscious intent ... acquired through the necessities of daily practice ... and organized by

an underlying symbolic logic that is often unconscious ... everyday body techniques are actually the main means by which the existing social order is produced and maintained; it follows that they must be important sites for challenging and transforming the social order when change does occur (Brownell, 1995: 10, 285).

Another phrase used in describing the movement of capoeiristas is *jôgo de cintura* (game of the waist associated with flexibility and mobility of the hips). *Jôgo de cintura* is a bodily quality and a specific attitude towards everyday life that emphasizes a cunning agility. It significantly relates to Brazilian *malandragem*, and is said to be a physical impediment for non-Brazilians.

Downey (2005a: 119) notes that “Brazilians consider a talent for *malandragem* to be a national trait”, since this characteristic is evident in distinctive style in soccer, samba lyrics and footsteps, capoeira tactics and motion, and even in everyday life. He links corporeality and character when discussing the connection between the way of walking and personal characteristics (of an individual, group, and even the nation). He (2005: 128) argues that *andar gingando* (walking in *ginga* manner) is characteristic of an individual who is *esperto* (smart), and that *jôgo de cintura* is significant for samba dancers, football players, *malandros*, *capoeiristas*, and politicians. Downey stresses that a flexible and soft waist reflects the relaxed and malicious character of Brazilians, since body flexibility or rigidity is often associated with character and virtues (e.g., in many European societies bodily uprightness correlates with a ‘cultivated’ individual and with virtues such as pride, dignity, honesty, and courage) (Downey, 2005a: 130). Lewis (1992: 190) makes a similar observation when he writes that the idea of pretense in *jôgo de cintura* refers to the creation of facades behind which shady activities are hidden. Such a characteristic is often attributed to the Brazilian people, especially those in power. It corresponds to their frequent attempts to cover up government corruption (Lewis, 1992: 190).

The difficulties of non-Brazilians to acquire cunningness in the game are attributed to their physical body, specifically to their *cintura dura* (stiff waist), the opposite of the *cintura mole* (soft waist). *Cintura dura* disables *jôgo de cintura*. Downey (2005a) claims that *cintura dura* impedes non-Brazilians in soccer, on the dance floor, in carnival processions, and in capoeira. *Cintura dura* impedes the movement of the whole body as one unit. The torso usually remains rigid, regardless of how the legs work. Therefore, non-Brazilians have to first cultivate the skill of relaxing their waist in order to be able to perform movements with the entire body (and not only with its parts).

However, when analysing the 'body culture' of Brazilians and non-Brazilians, one should take into account that in Brazil, capoeira is widely practiced by the poor and elsewhere by those who can afford the lessons. Abib (2005) argues that capoeira as an educational form is more appropriate and more effective for poorer children, since their access to formal education is hampered and their way of being in the *roda* is similar to their everyday being in the world. For that reason they can easily identify with capoeira. Moreover, being good in capoeira might improve their status in the social hierarchy. Therefore, due to the limited opportunities outside the sport, poor children might be more motivated to take advantage of the opportunities provided by capoeira. Besides, they are also 'accustomed' to cope with everyday life, which is full of insecurity, physical hardship, and daily bitterness.

On the other hand, the majority of practitioners from outside do not have the same economic problems as poor Brazilians do. They can learn the movements and techniques used in *jôgo*, but according to my informants, they need more time and have greater difficulty acquiring a 'feeling for the game'. The environment from which a practitioner comes and in which he trains significantly determines his embodiment of capoeira skills.

The bodily dispositions are negotiated, questioned and (re)created within a specific environment. However, there are different degrees of embodied capoeira knowledge. Variations in physical ability, motives, interpretation, and exposure to different visual, textual and personal influences affect a practitioner and his level of incorporation and identification with capoeira. But in any case, the embodiment of capoeiristic skills never ends. A practitioner is being and becoming a capoeirista simultaneously.

Capoeirista is the embodiment of agility, which includes the skill of (1) circular and unpredictable movement and knowing how to adapt to different situations (*molejo*); (2) mathematical precision (knowing the distance and timing when to apply a particular technique), and (3) aesthetics, which applies to the performance of beautiful movements with a specific purpose. In addition to physical ability, suitable tactics, musical skills, and acquisition of songs and history are all required for the creation of a 'true' capoeirista. A knowledge of the game, transmitted orally, is grounded in experiences and music. Capoeira knowledge is embodied in practitioners, and is constantly being (re)created through motion and song. Mastering the game is achieved particularly through interactions.

Conclusion

Capoeiristic *habitus* consists of knowledge, attitudes and skills enabling capoeiristas to stay in tune with the environment of lurking danger, to cope with an ambiguous, unstable and uncertain environment – not only in the *roda*, but also in daily life outside it. It is learned and cultivated in the process of training and acquired through a lived experience within a particular environment. It can be embodied early in life, and is not only a by-product of capoeira training. This means that some Brazilians already bring to capoeira certain skills acquired on the streets, while others start practising it to cultivate them in order to know how to recognize and behave in similar situations of deception and oppression. Due to the social circumstances, rich people in Brazil also have to cultivate the skills of permanent awareness and control. The elements of the capoeira game help them to cope with, understand, and live within an unequal world.

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