

COMMUNICATING CULTURE THROUGH *CAPOEIRA*

by

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of *capoeira*, a dance based in the martial arts and originating among slaves in Sixteenth-Century Brazil, has increased greatly in recent decades as it has spread worldwide as a performance representative of Brazilian history and culture. In 1974, *capoeira* was declared the national sport of Brazil. Today *capoeira* academies and competitions may be found wherever Brazilian culture is celebrated and communicated in many major foreign cities. My thesis, through the participant/observer method and the use of long interviews, examines *capoeira* as it is practiced in one particular academy far from the art form's place of origin. In the tradition of the cultural studies branch of communication, my thesis analyzes the movements, manners, and fashions of *capoeira*. I conclude that *capoeira* constitutes a cultural communication that has evolved from its roots in human slavery, suffering, and rebelliousness to a modern-day expression of athleticism, art, and community-building.

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INTRODUCTION

Capoeira, an indigenous Brazilian martial art, has been preserved through four centuries as a cultural artifact, and has been passed down through dozens of generations of Brazilians who practice its rapid kicking, spinning, sweeping, and flipping movements. *Capoeira* can be traced to the Sixteenth Century and the Portuguese occupation of Brazil, when men among the enslaved local population began to choreograph precise movements as a charade of combat in preparation for possibly fighting their oppressors. Brazil's occupiers and colonizers – and later even its constitutional government – regarded *capoeira* warily as subversion, however, and it remained outlawed into the 1930s. As laws forbidding its practice and performance were relaxed, *capoeira* masters, or *mestres*, began teaching it legally and brought it to the outside world, and its popularity has increased greatly during the past fifty years as it has spread globally. In 1974, *capoeira* achieved status in Brazil as the official national sport. Today *capoeira* academies and competitions are found in major cities across the Americas and in Europe and Asia, too.

Its status as a national sport immediately categorizes *capoeira* as a martial art, and such is its historical origin. Its status as a martial art implies that *capoeira* still represents a form of fighting, but as a non-contact sport. Its performance as a dance or movement accompanied by music presents *capoeira* as an art form. And its global representation of things Brazilian suggest it as cultural signifier. As modern ritual, what cultural remnants endure and are communicated? This thesis, which culminates my six years of interest in and knowledge about *capoeira*, constitutes a cultural study of *capoeira* as communicative act. This study employs participation-observation and interviews to examine and analyze

capoeira's movements, its manners, its fashion, and even its physical environment – the public and private spaces in which it may be found in one city outside Brazil.

This thesis addresses these research questions:

- (a) What does *capoeira* communicate about Brazilian culture and history?
- (b) What symbolic meanings exist in *capoeira* for practitioners and are communicated between them and among them?

Background

In the past two decades, several definitive book-length treatments of *capoeira*'s history and culture have been published. For this thesis, and after a review of the authoritative literature, I have triangulated knowledge and explanations of *capoeira* primarily from three sources (Almeida, 1986; Lewis, 1992; Galm, 1997).

Versions of the origin of *capoeira* vary. Some scholars think that it was brought from Africa to Brazil by slaves in the Sixteenth Century. Certainly, the name of one form of *capoeira*, known as *engola* – for Angola – hints at the connection. Others say that *capoeira* cannot be found in African cultural history; therefore it must be an indigenous Brazilian ritual created by slaves masquerading their martial art as dance. Or it could be a mix of Brazilian and African cultures. In any case, *capoeira* has not been always legal and for centuries was practiced hidden from the law's eye.

Now, untold numbers of people around the world practice *capoeira*. Because it was long secretive and remains popular as a ritual of the streets, and because of its explosive growth, it is hard to estimate the actual number of people who practice it. Even the more than 30,000 registered users at the *capoeira.com* World Wide Web site does little to measure its reach. Brazilians live *capoeira* daily, and it is imbedded in their

culture, not only as a sport but also as a nationalistic cultural communicator that they understand. As in the case of the Brazilian *samba*, it is a Brazilian dance understood to be in “their blood.”

Describing *capoeira* requires highlighting several different characteristics of the movement: martial arts, dance, ritual, musical performance, communicative act between the performers and between performers and audience, each of which reveals itself at various moments during a typical event. The fundamental description, since it is the one most firmly grounded in the players’ or performers’, or even in audience’s own conceptions of what they are doing, is game or sport. Among *capoeira* practitioners, known as *capoeiristas*, there is a tendency to use “game” (*jogo*) as the basic, traditional term, used in informal occasions and traditional styles of play. The term “sport” (*esporte*) is used in formal occasions, tournaments, for the outside audience and media.

Two aspects of the *capoeira* phenomenon merit introduction here because of their significance in my research findings: the *roda* and the music.

Capoeira is always performed by two players inside a circle, called the *roda*, ringed by other *capoeiristas* and spectators, both of whom may participate through clapping, singing or playing the instruments. The symbolic meaning of the circle is unanimity.

It has been said that the musicality is essential in the *capoeira*. The melody is the root and corpse of the art and shows from all directions and all instruments. *Berimbaus*, *atabaques*, *agogos*, *pandeiros*; everything is a sound and movement. The songs are present from the initial formation of the circle, or *roda*. The first song, usually directed by the oldest present *capoeirista* in the circle, is usually an improvisation. This could be

from respect to the old representatives of the art or to the art itself, embedded in these people who preserved it through the ages.

When the first song begins, the movement does not even exist yet. Everybody's attention is concentrated on the music. It could be because the *capoeirista* expresses his presence in the circle or his different experiences along his life. Or it could be that it brings old memories from the childhood, from the history of the game and the *capoeiristas*. Music is one of the instruments of preserving memories, transmitting the traditions from different times of the *capoeira*. The songs sometimes express the sadness because of a missing friend, already dead, giving a practical example, a lesson about life. The movements evolve in accordance with the songs, in a peculiar language. The songs prescribe the movements that will occur in the circle. Their meaning could be a provocation for some and a joke for others. But by all means, the songs have one common characteristic: the figurative language, restricted to the comprehension of the players.

Each instrument shades and gives life to *capoeira*. The sound can give pleasure to the players dedicated to the art, teaching a way of discovering different ways of communication. But the most important instrument heard in every kind of *capoeira* is the *berimbau*. It is important how the *berimbau* is made and even more, it is important that each *capoeirista* make her or his own *berimbau*, since its playing takes on its owner's personality. Sometimes there is only the accompaniment of the *berimbau* and nothing else as a sound guide to the rhythm of *capoeira*.

This chapter has introduced the research questions and provided some historical background. It has also previewed the importance of the *roda* and of the music in

capoeira. Subsequent chapters provide a review of the relevant research literature; discuss the methodology of this thesis research; detail the findings from my participation-observation and interview responses; and analyze *capoeira*'s cultural signifiers while suggesting future research. The next chapter reviews several cultural studies that inform my research interest and methods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rich history of cultural studies includes several ethnographic and participant-observer projects that have sought to interpret and communicate some understanding about exotic artifacts of sport, dance, and art. In some cases, these indigenous rituals have been interpreted to explain aspects of the culture. This chapter also acknowledges the seminal work in the explanation of *capoeira*. The studies discussed in this chapter are part of the tradition of research my thesis follows. In my conclusion in Chapter 5, I return to the cultural studies tradition to place my own study in context.

Deep play

Geertz (1973) explains that ritual is a transformer and user of symbols. And those symbols are powerful in developing the imagination of those who understand them, regardless of being participants or just spectators. Symbols can tell us some things about the people who use them and who create them. There could be different approaches in understanding the dance. We can look at it from a “local” point of view: the hidden transcript of the meaning known to practitioners. We can look at it also from a “universal” point of view: the public transcript, the meaning revealed to the audience. These two views are interrelated and are embedded within each other. Different people may have different understanding of the same event or symbol, by virtue of whom and what they are. Still, these rituals reinforce and strengthen the society as a group and strengthen the ties between individuals. The structure of the society is strengthened by the mythic symbolization of the social values, performed and incorporated in a certain ritual.

Geertz's (1973) ethnographic study of the Balinese culture focuses in particular on the ritual of the cockfight. Geertz reveals how such a phenomenon as the cockfight represents an enormous part of the Balinese culture but does not explain why exactly the play is so revealing of these deep cultural roots. He finds in the Balinese cockfight a kind of "deep play" (p. 436), in which money is less a measure of utility and more a symbol of moral satisfaction. The bets on which cock would win the fight are intended beyond increasing one's wealth; rather, they moreover symbolize pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness.

Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight as an exclusively male public activity, a single-sex activity. Balinese women are excluded from even observing. Bali is said to be rather a "unisex" society, which is expressed in its customs and symbolism. Sexual differentiation is present in other social events and activities. For Balinese men, the cockfight is one such important phenomenon that differentiates them. In the cock ring, it is not actually cocks that are fighting, it is actually men. They identify themselves with their specific cocks. In the cockfight, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society's temper at the same time; or more specifically, this is a manifest of particular cultural traits.

Dance

Another ethnographic approach to cultural symbolism was explored by Sylvia Rodriguez (1996) who studied the *Matachines* dance in New Mexico. She observed about ten versions of the dance trying to find the basic commonalities of the dance as a regional complex, as well as specific information about each individual performance community. It is a dance with a complicated choreography, poignant music, and costumes with

brilliant colors. The *Matachines* dance is a ritual drama performed on a certain saint's days in Indian and Mexicano/Hispano communities along the upper Rio Grande valley and elsewhere in the greater Southwest. Rodriguez observes, for example, that among the Picuris Indians, the *Matachines*, which is performed on the afternoon of Christmas Eve and again later on Christmas Day, involves only a handful of dancers because the tribe itself is miniscule. The emphasis is on the powerful acoustical and visual effects made more dramatic inside the Picuris narrow and high-ceilinged church. Rodriguez notes that the dance does not seem to have a describable choreography or specific name for the different dance steps their particular brand of *Matachines* entails. Still, the full sequence of the dance appears recognizable to the participants and to the observers, much as *capoeira*'s improvisational form. Rodriguez notes that the dance is clearer in this version than in some other tribes'. With fewer dancers available to perform, the spacing is greater, and the patterns of movement more discernible. That the Picuris' dance is perhaps less opulent and polished than others' reflects the economic impoverishment of these particular people.

Creative arts

Many African tribes use masks to perform different religious or every day rituals. There are many different ways to make a mask and this is because there are many representations and meanings the different masks embody in them. Ceremonies in which masks are exhibited are usually agrarian rituals or funerals. These ceremonies are spectacles in which music, chanting, and measured recitation of mythical poems form a broad dynamic and colorful choreographic ensemble, played out over several days in the public square. The wearing of masks is generally a male prerogative; women are not

allowed to see them. In societies such as the Mende in Sierra Leone, however, there exist strictly feminine ceremonies. Laude (1971) studied primitive arts and civilizations and described at length the cultural signifier of the mask in African art. He gathered most of his information through anthropological and ethnic studies by historians who traveled and lived on the premises where the art is born. He explained that the role of the mask is to reaffirm, at regular intervals, the truth and the immediate presence of myths in everyday life. Masks strengthen the collective existence in all its complex aspects.

Foreman (1999) explained how mask manifests in its construction. She studied different masks, from different cultures by gathering information in museums, visiting workshops throughout the world and studying what maskmaking means to the wearer and the maker. One of the forms of disguise she mentions is the “face-less” mask, which is worn in an attempt to be “invisible”. Paradoxically, such masks can be said to reveal as well as conceal. The act of wearing a “face-less” mask often broadcasts the intent and even the status of the wearer. Most masks, however, take the form of a face or features and so give the wearer an identity.

Morris and Preston-Whyte (1994) studied the beadwork of the Zulu tribe in the eastern part of South Africa. They found that the beads and the beaded decorations derive their values and popularity in Southern Africa. All beads are combined, particularly in the case of men’s ceremonial dress, with feathers and animal skins and often with large bronze and copper arm rings. Beaded ornaments invariably complement the costumes worn at weddings and the other ceremonies which, like the coming of age of a young girl, mark the stages in the life cycle of most individuals. They are also characteristic of the dancing outfits adopted by young people who belong to both formal and informal rural

youth organizations. It is usually in these uniforms that groups of girls and boys from different geographical areas perform at public events, and the distinctive color and style of each uniform is matched in the beadwork that accompanies it. Styles differ from region to region and they speak largely to the outsider. The color and design convey different meanings to the recipients of beaded ornaments, and to the audience for which costumes are designed and chosen. Zulu beadwork has long been thought to constitute a system of non-verbal communication, and much of its appeal has derived from the mystery thought to be associated with the language of beads.

Capoeira

In his book *Capoeira, a Brazilian art form*, Bira Almeida (1986), known as Mestre Acordeon, lays out many aspects of the history, philosophy and practice of *capoeira*. He describes his experience in the most famous schools of *capoeira* in Brazil, those formed by the pioneers of contemporary *capoeira* and the direct students of the typical *capoeira* performers, the ones that have done it even when it has been illegal and prosecuted by the law, ever since it has been practiced in little corners of hidden streets. Mestre Acordeon explains *capoeira* so that even people who are not familiar with this cultural form come to understand the basic meaning of it: “Living this art for many years and loving the beauty of its unsophisticated people has been a gift that taught me how to see and appreciate Capoeira the way it is, and how to stand for my beliefs.” (Almeida, 1986).

This chapter has offered a review of several cultural studies relevant to the research undertaken for this thesis. From Geertz’s thick description of deep play to Almeida’s in-depth description of *capoeira*, this body of literature informed my own

research into a ritual of sport, dance, and play as communicative act. Similarities between these cultural studies and this thesis will be addressed in my conclusion in Chapter 5. The next chapter describes the methods used in carrying out the research.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to understand the meaning of *capoeira* as cultural communicator. In order to collect the necessary information, several methods were used. Qualitative tools appeared most appropriate for completing this study. It does not focus on numbers or ratings, but rather it is deeper. All of the research gathered should be considered empirical. My presence was known in all methods.

I conducted in-depth interviews with people familiar with and practicing *capoeira*, both native and non-native Brazilians, using the methods suggested by Lindlof & Taylor (2002). Throughout this thesis, pseudonyms are used in place of real names to protect identities. Roughly 10 people were engaged in either casual conversation or formal interview, and all signed consent forms. Three interviews, with the master of the academy himself and with two longtime practitioners, were conducted formally and at greater length than the briefer, periodic exchanges in passing with other participants. The master of the academy, about 35 years old, who comes from Salvador, Bahia, a large city on the coast of Brazil, is referred to in this thesis simply by the name and title, *Mestre*, by which he and other masters are always known. The second person interviewed formally was a woman about 25 years old, with a Hispanic background but born in the United States. Her pseudonym is Jennifer. The third lengthy interview involved a 30-year-old man, born in Brazil but currently living in the United States, is given here the pseudonym Alexandro. Others who agreed to talk about *capoeira*, but who were not interviewed at length, are introduced by their pseudonyms as they appear in Chapter 4. All signed consent forms in accordance with IRB protocols. All interviews took place at the academy, a comfortable environment for the interviewees, a setting they associated with

capoeira, which helped to sharpen the focus of the interview as an immersion in the culture. The timing of the interviews was in each case convenient for the interviewees, before or after class, in order to accommodate their schedules. In order to obtain all the information needed for my research, I developed a basic interview guide suiting my needs. I audiotaped the interviews and transcribed them immediately afterward. The use of the in-depth interviews was to be able to focus on and probe into specific issues which were relevant to my topic. For instance, interviewing allowed me to obtain answers specific to the questions on which I was focusing.

I also used the method of observation suggested by Berg (2004). I observed a series of *capoeira* classes held at two different times of day, on Tuesdays and Thursdays at an academy in a Florida city, over two months' time. I also observed one *capoeira* demonstration in a busy public gathering place. In order to observe from the closest possible vantage point, and to better and more openly secure the confidence of those I observed and interviewed, I participated in 16 morning and night classes in the same academy, adopting the method prescribed by Lindlof & Taylor (2002). The observations gave the opportunity to obtain information that perhaps an individual in an interview may not offer. Further, the observation provided insight into the participants' behavior during the study. The participants I observed were numerous and from different age groups, starting with a 2-year-old through people in their 30s. The participants included men and women and boys and girls, and all were *capoeira* practitioners. During the *capoeira* demonstration, random spectators were also observed. During the research, I noted physical and social interaction between the participants. I also carefully noted the time

and date of all visits and included chronological notes of relevant occurrences, observations, and meetings. I included basic descriptions of settings.

After accumulating information through notes and tapes, I wrote a detailed chronological narrative. Next, I interpreted those findings and, finally, drew conclusions by analyzing my own notes and final narrative and identifying the information according to themes and using categorization and coding processes.

This integration of qualitative methods enabled me to attempt on a smaller scale, given limits of time, access, and resources, the kind of “thick description” achieved by Geertz (1973) and others in their cultural studies of communication. The critical examination and reflection that followed these methods has resulted in the final three sections of my thesis: one chapter comprising my findings (description); and another including my discussion (interpretation) and my conclusion (understanding). The total result of this method and my writing constitutes a plausible analysis of *capoeira* as communicative act. In the next chapter, I will detail and chronicle my findings from my interaction with *capoeira* culture.

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter details observations – sights, sound, and experiences – during the research of *capoeira*. The narrative constructed from notes begins with an explanation of how the academy was identified and chosen for convenience and ease of access.

In search of capoeira

The search for a place in which to observe *capoeira* and meet *capoeiristas* and talk about their interest in and knowledge of *capoeira* began in late Spring of 2005. I needed to find a setting convenient to my home, my place of work, and my university. Through a Google search on the Internet of the keyword terms “capoeira” and “[city name deleted],” I found local phone numbers and called around until locating a *capoeira* academy in the Florida city where this research was conducted.

Noting the address, I start the search of the academy one early afternoon. Driving around in what I know to be the vicinity, I cannot find it. I stop to ask for directions at a small shopping plaza, which by its signs and businesses strikes me as a “little Brazil”: the country where *capoeira* originated. Stores and small groceries cater to Brazilians. Language on all the signs is in Portuguese. I choose one Brazilian restaurant, and go inside to seek assistance, and I am promptly greeted in Portuguese. Everyone inside the restaurant is speaking Portuguese, a few televisions are broadcasting Brazilian channels, and even the food appears to be native Brazilian cuisine. Since I speak Portuguese, I respond in the language and ask where the *capoeira* academy is. The man who greeted

me at the door escorts me to the rear of the restaurant and points out the windows and across the street, to a building that looks like a warehouse: the *capoeira* academy.

I leave the restaurant and drive the short distance to park at the warehouse, on the side of which appears a large-scale drawing of *capoeira* dancers, some dancing in a circle while others playing a musical instrument called the *berimbau*. The artwork flanks a large opening, like a garage door but set above ground level. Leaning and peering in, *capoeiristas* could be seen as on a theater stage inside the hall. Two men and two women are exercising and stretching their limbs. All four are wearing the loose pants of *capoeiristas*, colored white or green and yellow. All are barefoot. The men are shirtless, as is the custom, and the women are tight-fitting tank tops and sports bras. Here they are, practicing *capoeira* in a country foreign from its origins and hundreds of years after the dance's origin, but they remain faithful to *capoeira*'s true simple fashions. The only oddity that could be noted right away is the presence of green-and-yellow *capoeira* pants, when white follows the true tradition. In Brazil, white is the logical color because capoeiristas are carrying on a tradition. It also makes sense that *capoeira* as an export of Brazilian culture, would promote abroad the green and yellow of the Brazilian flag and national colors.

A smaller door left of this opening leads inside. As I walk in, the people inside notice me. A man with the perfectly sculpted body of a true *capoeirista* and who is leading the exercises stops and greets me. He is the *mestre*, or master of the academy, its leader, and that is how he would be addressed: *Mestre*. The others stay at their exercise while *Mestre* asks how he might help. His broken English includes a Brazilian accent. To talk, we go upstairs to a large hall littered with a few more people, all practicing *capoeira*

movements in silence to the low strains of *capoeira* music emanating from a compact disc player. I ask to speak to him quietly and privately so as not to bother the others. We walk to a small office with just a computer and an office chair, file cabinet drawers and numerous pictures hanging on the walls and filling almost all of the available space there. They are pictures of people, perhaps relatives, and one large, framed picture of a little boy, present in other pictures too. There are also many framed certificates from different countries noting achievements in *capoeira*.

I explain why I am there and what I am seeking to learn about *capoeira*, to observe training sessions and *capoeira* events and to talk with participants. *Mestre* is agreeable and responds that this would be no problem. He helps with informational brochures and class and training schedules and even offers to start training me right away in order to understand better what *capoeira* is all about. With enough information for now, I decide to leave to begin planning how I will carry out my observation and possibly my participation for my research. At this time the training session is ending, and the *capoeiristas* are just chatting. All of them approach and wish me a nice day. This was my impression upon meeting *capoeiristas* for the first time. They seem very friendly, as if they accept every stranger with a smile on their face and good intentions.

The academy itself is essentially one big room with little furnishings. One wall is covered with a big mirror, in front of which people are watching and checking their own, and others', movements as they train. The visual artistry of each movement is very important, and the mirror helps reveal all perfections and imperfections to be either repeated or improved. Other walls display pictures from competitions and *capoeira* demonstrations. There are plenty of certificates and awards, and on one of them is

Mestre's name. There are also framed letters of thank you from other such academies. Set next to the walls are music instruments: the *berimbau* and the *atabaque*. In one corner is a niche used for storage. From the ceiling above the niche hangs a giant poster promoting Brazil and written in Portuguese. The floor is covered by a circular yin-yang symbol colored in the green and yellow of the Brazilian flag. This big circle – obviously the *roda*, the circle in which *capoeiristas* play – is right next to the large entrance that is so visible upon first approaching the building. It is clear that when *capoeiristas* dance inside this circle inside the warehouse, passersby outside can observe the spectacle within and are thereby drawn to it visually and brought closer. The raised level of this “stage” inside gives the performance the impression of a theatrical play. The instruments on display nearby add to the authenticity of the happenings there. An announcement board near the exit door ensures that people do not miss important communication.

Mestre explains that the largest classes are held Tuesday and Friday nights, when most of the participants in the academy could be met. This academy includes about 50 participants altogether, but they are never present all at once. The next visit will be during a big class, probably on a Tuesday.

Journey Into a Capoeira Subculture

Day 1

The return to the academy warehouse is for a Tuesday night class, which starts at 7:30. About 20 people are already there for the class, 11 men and 9 women, all between the ages of about 20 and 35. The number of students in each session throughout the period of this study will fluctuate greatly, from as few as 2 up to as many as 30. There is also one boy, about 13 years old, on this night. All are dressed in *capoeira* fashion: loose

pants (either the traditional white or the green-and-yellow of this academy) and bare feet. *Mestre* greets with a hug and a kiss on first one cheek then the other. He explains: “In Brazil we do two kisses, one on each cheek, not only one like people do here [in the United States].” Here is the first lesson in Brazilian culture: two kisses, one on each cheek – the same custom followed in France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Had it been brought to Brazil by Europeans?

The *capoeiristas* begin jogging in a big circle around the perimeter of the hall for about ten minutes. After that, *Mestre* stands in front of everybody but facing the mirror. He begins demonstrating exercises, stretching limbs and the torso, and everyone follows along, counting aloud. He would count till “ten” and start again from “one.” Later he explains that people who cannot anticipate when an exercise might end retain their strength and maintain their pace better. After a series of warm-up exercises, they move to a large hall containing trampolines and other exercise equipment. A woman there is practicing acrobatics and gymnastics while hanging from ropes dangling from the ceiling. There is also an artificial wall, against which some men are climbing by bounding from the trampolines. These people are professional acrobats from a nearby circus.

The *capoeiristas* go directly to the exercise mats in the center of the floor. There, they take turns at cartwheels and other acrobatic exercises. After a few practice rounds, all go to the trampolines and take turns practicing front and back flips. Some are much more proficient than others, but everybody practices together. Each time a less-able student attempts a flip, he or she is applauded and congratulated.

After an hour of flipping on trampolines, the class returns to the main *capoeira* hall. It is time for the *roda* to begin. The students gather around the yin-yang circle.

Mestre turns on the CD player, and everyone begins clapping in rhythm to the *capoeira* music. The first two students inside the circle initiate their *capoeira* movements by joining the circle with a cartwheel, followed by the *ginga*, which is a combination of arm and leg movements in what would appear to be a defensive posture. But before beginning another movement, they touch hands. On the perimeter of the circle, which is about 15 feet in diameter, all the others are clapping and even singing along with the music. In the game, they flip, swing, kick, and sweep as close as possible to each other, but do not touch each other. This intentional lack of contact, a determined non-violence, illustrates the great distance *capoeira* has come since its roots in combat preparation. The play continues as people in turn enter the *roda* in pairs. Each couple stays in the *roda* about a minute or two, until somebody else decide to go in. Whenever one *capoeirista* is tired, he or she temporarily leaves the *roda*, clapping hands, and starts walking around the circle. After a few turns around the circle, both players return to the starting point, touch hands, and play again. After all participate in *the roda*, it is time for the salutation. All of the players face *Mestre* and begin performing the basic step of the *capoeira*, called the *ginga*. When *Mestre* finally flashes them a sign, they all make one final kick and shout out loud, “*Axe*,” which in *capoeira* means “peace,” simply a thanks to *Mestre* for teaching them.

As the class ends, all the students hug, kiss, and thank one another. Some leave immediately after. Some stay behind, just talking. Some keep practicing movements. *Mestre* plays a videotape of demonstrations and previous classes, and some students begin to wander over to watch it. Some of them appear in the video and watch intently, still learning.

Day 2

The next Tuesday, I join the class and dress in loose athletic pants, not official *capoeira* pants, but comfortable enough. There are fewer people in the morning class – just one man and three other women – than have attended the night class. The ratio of women to men is striking because *capoeira* was originally and historically practiced and performed by men. One movement, an aerial, which looks like a no-hands cartwheel, appears very difficult. *Mestre* challenges: “Do you want to do it? If you want to, you can do it, it is all in your mind, and people can do everything as long as they try it and are not afraid. Just loosen up your mind and go for it.”

Then comes time for the *roda*. Everyone has waited patiently for so long. People start dancing and trying to outdo their opponent, their “enemy.” But when they leave the *roda*, they hug each other and smile.

There is a new announcement on the board for a *capoeira* demonstration at the academy on the weekend.

Day 3

The day of the demonstration, I take my camera to record permanent images of the movements. It is very hot, almost unbearable for an outdoors demonstration of such physical exertion. Nearby is a boy, about 12 years old, wearing *capoeira* pants and accompanied by a woman apparently his mother. A man in his 20s approaches them, wearing *capoeira* pants. The young man says he has been doing *capoeira* for about a year. He is from Brazil but moved to the United States when he was 5. He first saw *capoeira* performed in the 1993 movie “Only the Strong.” Each time he returned to Brazil, he learned more about *capoeira* by seeing it everywhere. The young man is

preparing his *berimbau* for the event. He ties some cords and tests it, listening to the sounds it produces. He can tell the subtle differences. Little by little, more people join, all of them recognizable from the night class. *Mestre* comes, too. Another adolescent boy's parents arrive. The father has brought a video camcorder, which he sets up in front of the stage. The *capoeiristas* set their *atabaques* and *berimbaus* next to the wall and start playing *capoeira* music and singing. Little by little, an audience of passersby gathers, drawn in part by a big poster illustrating and promoting *capoeira*.

After a few introductory songs, the first couple of players enters the *roda* and begins performing a demonstration of *capoeira*. The audience grows immediately as the actual movements begin. People come out of the shops, including a businessman in a business suit with a suitcase in his hand who stops for a few minutes and takes in the scene. Families come and go. A mild summer breeze comforts the audience and the *capoeiristas*.

The couples onstage change intermittently. They take turns at performing and playing the instruments and singing. *Capoeiristas* are required to know to play instruments and sing along. *Mestre*'s movements are the most polished, from a slow cartwheel to a handstand to a quick back flip. When he plays with the more advanced *capoeiristas*, the demonstration is at its peak. The audience applauds and shrieks at each of his precision movements. Children ask their parents what is going on. One girl starts singing along with the *capoeiristas*. A family passes by: a father, a mother, and their teenage daughter, none of them showing any interest. The father finally glances toward the stage, then turns around right away, as if he is confused about whether to show interest and perhaps identify himself at some level with all these people gathered together

for *capoeira*. Perhaps foreign cultures are not for everyone. An Indian family approaches for a closer look, but already there are too many people around the stage, so they stay back. But the father eventually makes his way forward with a baby stroller and reaches the front. Soon his daughter is out of the stroller and standing next to him with a wide grin. One of the women playing *capoeira* comes off the stage and starts handing out fliers to the audience, promoting a free class of *capoeira* at the academy. All around in the audience, smiling people seem to enjoy the moment and the event.

The demonstration ends about ninety minutes later, and the audience leaves. The players are tired. They sit on the stage, relaxing and joking, having fun and discussing what just has happened. All are there to experience and enjoy the physical exertion that is *capoeira* but also to socialize, united by this one thing.

Day 4

One of the *capoeiristas*, John, has brought his children: a 2-year-old boy, James, and a 5-year-old girl, Paloma. The belt their father wears is earned only after four years of *capoeira* experience. The boy, who cannot even have been walking for more than a year, who can speak only a few words and still wears a diaper, already knows *capoeira*. During the warm-up exercises, he attempts some of them. He tries the cartwheel with everybody else, in the middle of the hall. During the *roda*, while his father is playing with someone else in the circle, James keeps calling to him and showing that he wants to play, too. He starts spinning himself, trying to do some kicks, and everyone applauds and smiles at him. *Mestre* decides to prove a point about the boy's indoctrination into *capoeira*, so he stops the music and the boy stops, too. He turns to *Mestre* and waits for

him to turn the music back on. *Mestre* plays some other music, very different from the sounds of *capoeira*. The little boy makes an angry face and shouts: “*Capoeira*, please!”

The sounds of *capoeira* are turned back on, making the little boy happy so that he starts spinning around again and kicking inside the circle. His sister sits outside the circle; she knows that the circle is only for performing. She is holding the *pandeiro* in her hand and claps it to the rhythm. The grownups, too, remain outside the circle, clapping to the rhythm and the steps of the boy.

Day 5

The big door on the warehouse wall is already open. The sounds of the *berimbau* come from inside. The most advanced women in the class, Jennifer, along with one of the most advanced men, John, is standing in the middle of the circle playing their *berimbaus*. They smile and ask me to start playing the *atabaque* for them. It is my first experience with the instruments. The man teaches me two rhythms for different kinds of *capoeira*, a slow and a fast one. Very soon the *capoeira* songs sound better. I confuse the rhythm a few times, but they both patiently try to correct me. Another car arrives, and a man in white *capoeira* pants steps out of it. For just a moment he waits and watches, then approaches, grabs the *pandeiro* and joins in playing the song, which finally sounds full and proper. He demonstrates experience with *capoeira*. His body is a typical *capoeirista*'s: athletic and toned. He is wearing the yellow belt, which means he has attained the third level in *capoeira*. It does not matter that he is a stranger to the group; all are there for the *capoeira*.

After a few songs, the exercises begin. Four more people arrive. One of the women, I named Lora, brings her daughter, who is 10 months old. She is sleeping in her

baby seat. Lora leaves her on the side of the hall and does her exercises. In about an hour, *Mestre* sends us to the back of the building, where the trampolines are. Everyone takes turns practicing front flips on the trampoline. When my turn comes, I start jumping, but when I get close to the edge of the trampoline, I stop. *Mestre* is right there and instructs: “Jump! Jump!” I cannot. I am too afraid I will land wrong and break my neck. He explains that the cushions are large enough and soft and that no one can get hurt. Still frightened, I jump, just a simple front flip. Everyone applauds. This initial success provokes the desire for more. *Mestre* leaves Lora and me to practice, since both of us are new at front flips. Everybody else goes off to practice back flips, which are much harder and require much more strength and experience.

Eventually, it is time for the *roda*. The newcomer young man quickly demonstrates that he is highly skilled, and everyone responds positively and with awe. He plays *capoeira* so well he makes it appear easy to do, even though it is not easy at all. Meanwhile, several cars arrive and parked outside the large open door. People step out and watch for a few minutes. It calls to mind the demonstration a few days earlier, when passersby displayed curiosity.

Then we do our salutation and decide to stretch after the class. The stretching is usually done by two people helping each other to stretch better. The new man and I start stretching, and he pushes me nearly beyond the limits that my muscles and tendons can stretch, for this is the way in which bodies are enhanced and prepared for *capoeira*. He is very good at *capoeira*, and everything comes easily to him. Since he is a stranger to all, they start asking him where he is from, how long he has done *capoeira*. He is from New

Jersey, playing *capoeira* in an academy there. He is on vacation in Orlando and wants to practice *capoeira* with people from our academy.

Day 6

I am ten minutes late for class, but I am the first to arrive. *Mestre* is in his office. Only Jennifer comes. *Mestre* instructs us to begin, and we do the usual warm-up. He gives us each different tasks because my partner is advanced and has to learn movements to attain a higher level. I am still practicing beginner movements, such as *armada*, a spinning kick. Improvement at *capoeira* moves comes only gradually. Every five or ten minutes, *Mestre* checks our progress and corrects our mistakes. Eventually, I become exhausted and cannot catch my breath. When the class is over, Jennifer and I hug and congratulate each other.

Day 7

At the next class, very few people show up, and the exercise and warm-up begin with special work on addressing weaknesses in movement. Tonight, *Mestre* decides to teach the playing of the instruments, an essential component of *capoeira*. One legend holds that music was added to the early practice of *capoeira* by slaves to better disguise it from their overseers as a dance form. To earn the first belt, *Mestre* says, the music must be learned along with the movements. First is the *atabaque*, similar to a drum. It is made of real leather but is about three feet tall. On the sides of it are drawings of *capoeira* players. After the *atabaque* comes the *berimbau*, the main instrument one hears in *capoeira* music. It is another instrument made from scratch, just a wooden stick, aluminum cord, a *cabaça*, and a river stone. The *berimbau* is the one setting the rhythm

and guiding the other instruments and also the players. This is a difficult instrument to play, despite its simple appearance. The *atabaque* has simply been following the rhythm of the *berimbau*.

Day 8

Two adults are practicing the *berimbau*. Two children are playing with gymnastic equipment. Their young father, John, right away hands me the *berimbau* to play, and I am able to recall what I have recently learned. The other adult, a woman, is playing a faster rhythm. We have to move farther apart, to different parts of the hall, so we can each practice what we want.

Mestre comes in from outside a few minutes later and leads in the warm-up. He turns on the CD player, and the music of *capoeira* fills up the room. It excites the children, too, and they start running around, getting in the way of our routine. *Mestre* tells James in a firm tone that he must stay inside the circle and play *capoeira* there. The boy goes there right away without protest. He already knows enough about *capoeira* discipline to know that *Mestre*'s word is final. After the warm-up, comes the practice of *capoeira* movements. James notices and joins the students, attempting some movements. *Mestre* again tells him to get back to his circle, but the boy says that he wants only to hug his father first. Everyone laughs. *Mestre* tells him that he can hug his father and then go back in the circle.

It is time for the *roda* again. The children sit on chairs next to the wall. Paloma holds a *pandeiro* and plays it in rhythm with the music coming from the CD player. Even this 5-year-old can easily catch on to the rhythm of *capoeira* and play it just for fun, while watching *capoeiristas* playing *capoeira*.

Day 9

Fifteen minutes before the class, a man, Alexandro, whom I already know from a class, pulls up in his car. He consents to be interviewed while waiting for class to begin. Soon after, *Mestre* arrives with his 10-year-old son, Pedro, and Jennifer, the best student in the class. There is the exchange the traditional hug and kiss, and his son follows suit. Lora, with her 3 daughters, arrives soon after. The girls are ages 9 and 6 years old and 8 months old. All are wearing *capoeira* pants. One more woman from Brazil too, Consuelo, joins the class. It is a very diverse class, of all ages, all united because of one thing. Everyone is treating one another with the same respect.

Mestre's son is wearing a second belt. His abilities are amazing. A new movement is introduced, something between a cartwheel and a back flip, which proves very difficult to achieve. *Mestre's* ten-year-old does it perfectly. I decide to try it, too. I am afraid and thinking that nothing comes out, but the applause that follows anyway builds confidence. Pedro performs the move, and it looks much different from how I do it. He says: "You need to practice it more. I have been practicing this movement a lot. And you need to believe in yourself more and you'll do it."

Consuelo is trying a back flip that proves too hard for her. *Mestre* works closely and at length with her, and she finally achieves it. No one else is paying much attention, however, so *Mestre* stares at us and starts applauding her, illustrating to us the point that we should do the same. He wants to teach us that we should always encourage one another.

It is time for the *roda* again. Children and adults are playing against each other and treating each other with the same level of respect. Now everyone is paying attention

and taking turns. After a few songs, *Mestre* announces that it is Lora's birthday, so all should perform with her in honor of her birthday. All take turns and play with her. At the end, she can barely breathe.

I leave the class, still wearing my *capoeira* outfit and with no time to change it before making it to the library, which is about to close, to pick up a book. Inside, at the pickup desk are a few employees and few customers. One of the employees spots the *capoeira* outfit and exclaims right away: "Oh, *capoeira*!" She smiles and asks in Portuguese if I speak the language. I reply that I speak a little bit. Everybody starts asking about *capoeira*, so she explains to them right away that it is a Brazilian dance with some martial art elements. Obviously, she knows a lot about it. She asks where I am practicing and I tell her about the academy. And she mentions *Mestre*'s name. I smile, surprised that people I would least expect know about it.

Day 10

An hour before class, *Mestre* offers to tell what he knows about *capoeira*'s history. He relates his understanding of the origins of *capoeira*. Slaves were taken from Africa to Brazil in the Sixteenth Century, he says, and later had to defend themselves from the Portuguese oppressors and so developed a mesmerizing and deceptive dance that could be turned into a martial art if needed. Therefore, *capoeira* represents Brazil's turbulent origin and history. To this day, *capoeira* is still performed barefoot, *Mestre* says, in honor of the slaves, who could not have afforded, or been allowed, shoes. Also, he says, performing *capoeira* barefoot is more for discipline and training. He explains that you can feel more your body movements through your feet touching the ground without anything.

The origin of the circle, the *roda*, is African also, he explains. It symbolizes the full moon, when hunters performed rituals. The reflection of the full moon is the circle in which they are performing the rituals. And so they brought the idea of performing rituals in a circle with them to Brazil.

Mestre has been involved with *capoeira* for 28 years, since he was just a small child. He is from Salvador, Bahia, where *capoeira* originated, and has learned *capoeira* from two masters. One taught him the mental discipline of *capoeira*, which *Mestre* now does in his own classes. *Mestre* says that as a child he was very shy and did not communicate well because of his poor health. He found that *capoeira* not only helped him grow stronger and feel better but also helped him overcome his difficulties communicating. And so *capoeira* became his life, and he integrated it into all aspects of his life and found in it a livelihood.

Mestre was the first to bring it to this Florida city in the mid-1990's. It was a struggle to introduce this foreign idea because *capoeira* was not well known here despite the number of Brazilians in the community. It seems that they believed *capoeira* was a Brazilian thing, for Brazilians only, and was meant to stay in Brazil; and that Americans would not take to it. He explains that this was probably because in Brazil some decades ago, people looked upon *capoeira*, with its roots in slavery, as a pastime for the poor and for the people who lived on the streets. This attitude lingered even after it became the national sport in Brazil. So he created his academy here with two American students. As interest and his clientele grow, local Brazilians longing for *capoeira* began joining the classes. The local Brazilians are able to use *capoeira* as a way to find one another, to relate to one another, to come together. He says he sees examples of Brazilians who had

trouble assimilating in this country, who had trouble communicating, slowly overcome their problems in part through the community they discover through *capoeira*. *Capoeira* connected them.

Mestre believes that, to many foreigners who have discovered it, *capoeira* means Brazil. He feels that many people are attracted to *capoeira* not only for the physical aspect, but also because it represents the rich culture of an exotic and popular country. In fact, he says, outside Brazil, the people of any given country are often more serious about *capoeira* than are the displaced Brazilians living there. *Capoeira* is very popular in Europe. Academies are to be found in most big cities and draw thousands of students.

Mestre has already taught three classes this day, and so he is already fatigued. We end our conversation. Already, about 15 people have arrived for the next class, including 6 children, about ages 6 to 10. The adults with them also are wearing *capoeira* outfits and apparently are going to practice. One little girl approaches and introduces herself by her *capoeira* nickname, which she explains everyone in the academy has. She asks me what my nickname is, but I do not yet have one, I tell her. *Mestre* assigns them at the awarding of the first belt. Each nickname communicates some aspect of that student's personality as he perceives it.

Eventually, about 30 people show up for the class. *Mestre* turns on the CD player, and the sounds of Brazilian music, something between *capoeira* and *samba*, fill the room. Everyone starts exercising and singing along with the music. *Mestre* divides us into three groups because the room is too small for all of us to practice the different movements all at once. *Mestre*'s son is teaching a first-time student movements appropriate for beginners. Others take turns helping her and making her feel comfortable and not so

insecure since everyone else is experienced and able to perform much better. *Mestre* says encourages everyone to do her or his best because there is so much learning by watching others, and those behind in skill level will absorb both good energy and bad.

The *roda*, as always, is the best part of the class. It lasts about an hour. One of the most advanced students is giving everything to the game, and there is more competition and, this time, even aggression among some of the performers.

After class, *Mestre* instructs all the students to sit for a lecture. He speaks of the mental discipline of *capoeira*. He says that children will learn by watching how adults are playing. Therefore, adults should not show aggression, he says, but rather should show more respect to others, especially to others with a higher belt, to their elders, as well as to younger people who are there to learn from them. He explains that through *capoeira*, adults are teaching children how to act in daily life, also. *Capoeira* is not just a martial art, but an art for living, and that all should provide the younger generation the proper example of what *capoeira* is all about. He then thanks everyone for a great class and concludes with a good word for everyone seated before him.

Day 11

Mestre arrives with his son, and then come 3 more students. Among them is Lora with her 3 daughters. This time the 2 older girls are not going to practice but only watch and take care of the baby. The sounds of the same songs from two nights ago fill up the room again. During warm-up, Jennifer arrives.

Mestre is leading the class this time, and some of the movements he introduces are new to the less-experienced students. *Mestre* pays closer attention to them to help them correct mistakes.

The *roda* begins. By now, I am able to participate more often. Two nights ago, as the level of play escalated into aggression, I felt intimidated. Jennifer is among the more skilled and aggressive players, but she is always gentler when playing with newer students. It is a more enjoyable *roda* than two nights previously.

Jennifer agrees right away to an interview, and we go to the office to escape the noise. She explains that she is not Brazilian, but rather Hispanic. She was born in the United States, and the first time she saw *capoeira* was in San Francisco, where a friend introduced her to it. After that she saw the movie “Only the Strong” and learned even more. She found a *capoeira* academy in New York where she could practice. When she moved to this part of the country a few years ago, she was concerned there might not be a *capoeira* academy here. Then one day she saw some people practicing in the street, and when she asked, they told her about this academy. She joined it right away. She says that *capoeira* became part of her life.

She made friends in the academy and could not think of leaving it. She has come to know many Brazilians and the Brazilian community through *capoeira*, by meeting and communicating with people who have joined the academy and through their friends. *Capoeira* was the thread that tied them together and led her to their community gatherings. *Capoeira* piqued her interest in Brazilian culture in general. After learning about *capoeira*, she wanted to know more about Brazil and wanted to go to Brazil, not only because, she says, *capoeira* is performed differently there but also to get to know Brazil. To her, soccer and *capoeira* represent Brazil and bring its culture to the world. She feels part of the *capoeira* culture herself now: “*Capoeira* definitely grows in you.” If she ever moves away, she says, she would listen for the sounds of a *berimbau* and would

go and join the *roda* right away. *Capoeira* talks to her and would stay in her mind and her life forever.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Many different cultural phenomena determine and contribute to the authenticity of the cultures to which they pertain. This is a very broad area of study since cultures evolve every day, influenced by individuals or even influenced by other cultures. We may observe the same phenomenon being different in different times and different spatial places. It is not the differences we are looking for, but rather the role this phenomenon takes in the particular culture and its individuals' lives. In the case of *capoeira*, I was seeking to understand just what is being culturally communicated. In this section, I interpret my findings to better understand the communicative aspects of *capoeira*.

Physical space

Upon leaving the academy after meeting *Mestre* the first time, I knew I had just started, but I also knew that, unlike the experience of just reading and hearing about *capoeira* and seeing it in pictures or in a movie, I had seen it live. The quick and sudden foray into the academy felt as like a short visit to a small piece of Brazil, like being transported briefly to a different place. The signs in Portuguese and the Brazilian art hanging on the walls, the people speaking in the Brazilian accent, even the oppressive heat blowing in from outside the warehouse communicated something of the culture of *capoeira*. It seemed as if a small Brazilian neighborhood where time does not matter, where time stops in honor of *capoeira*. It was then that I first noticed that the academy warehouse stood in the middle of a large scrub field, surrounded by nothing but heat, crickets, and bushes. Until then, I had envisioned *capoeira* on a beach, as it is practiced

and performed in Rio de Janeiro, but of course, today, Rio is not the only place where *capoeira* is being communicated. And since it actually originated in Bahia, this barren central Florida setting is probably closest to the primitive original spaces in which: empty subtropical fields, burning heat, and little sound from civilization anywhere around.

The focal visual point of the academy and of the energies directed toward *capoeira* is the circle for the *roda*. This is where this art form more than 400 years old is practiced and performed. Inside this 15-foot-diameter circle, two players at a time meet, greet, and seem to attack each other, but non-violently, without any contact. In effect, this circle becomes the spot where this physical communication, this non-verbal conversation takes place. On the perimeter of this circle stand the other players and sometimes non-participant audience members, some playing instruments in the rhythm of the *capoeira* music, all in support of the players inside the ring. Thus, the movement and the music represent a pure harmony in and about the ring, an endless geometric shape unifying and encircling the game. At *Mestre's* academy, far from his native Brazil, he has chosen for the yin-yang symbol of the circle to be colored green and yellow in tribute to official colors of Brazil, as manifest in its flag.

The "look"

The *capoeira* master, or *mestre*, who runs the academy, says *capoeira* has more philosophical meaning than merely the physical exertion and that practicing *capoeira* teaches people how to live and respect others, even their adversaries. The costumes of the *capoeiristas* in his academy illustrate this. Practitioners in Brazil wear mainly white clothes, very simple ones. On the literal level, white or a light shade may have been the only color available for clothing for the slave culture in which *capoeira* originated. On a

symbolic level, however, white expresses purity, simplicity, something divine and clean. Its practitioners' appearance in white fulfills their striving for that inner discipline, their wish for a cleansed, pure way of living. In this particular academy, however, many of the participants are wearing green and yellow *capoeira* pants. This is an important part for the academy since these colors are the national colors of Brazil. As one sees these colors, without even knowing about *capoeira*, would notice right away representation of Brazil in people's appearance. *Capoeiristas* play in their bare feet, which, while aiding the balance and natural feel for each movement and shift, also is an homage to the slave originators of this art form, who would not have worn shoes because of their poverty and because it would limit their greater movement if they were to try to possibly escape. Many of the male *capoeiristas* also go shirtless for the same reason.

Communicating roda

Mestre had explained that the idea for the shape of the *roda* came from Africa, that the circle represented the full moon and its importance to hunters in providing light. People would gather in a circle symbolic of the full moon to celebrate the hunt. *Mestre* chose green and yellow in the design of the *roda* at his academy because he wanted to represent the Brazilian flag in his circle. The yin-yang symbol represents the sun and the moon in the Chinese cosmology. Used as a symbol in the *roda*, the yin-yang figure itself represents a freeze-frame of the dynamic movement and motion of two competitors. One person's movement is both extension of and response to the other person's movement. One's movements begin where the other's end. Together in action, *capoeiristas* appear as almost an organic whole when dancing, just as the complementary shapes in the yin-yang. They are opposites that exist in each other. *Capoeira* is not choreographed, but

rather is responsive to the moment and the mood. In this sense, it is indeed a non-verbal form of communication, a virtual, physical conversation.

And it is important to understand that the actual visual dynamic that is *capoeira* happens exactly in this circle. The exercises preceding the *roda* are also important part of uniting people, but in the circle itself is when participants explore the real *capoeira*. Break dancing may be thought of as derivative from *capoeira* since there are similarities in the acrobatic and gymnastic movements and in the traditional gathering around in a circle, which is actually just for facility for spectators in the viewing of it and holds no special symbolic meaning. But there are other significant communicative differences. Break dancing almost always features just a solo performer, one at a time, though multiple dancers may perform in turn. On the rare occasion when multiple break dancers perform at once, the result is a distracting spectacle with a challenging focus. The *roda* of *capoeira*, however, always involves the complements of yin and yang, the physical communication between two players. It is neither single player's performance that is communicated in the *roda*, but rather this two-way conversation.

The presence of women

As a female scholar, I acknowledge that my interpretation and analysis of what I saw, heard, and experienced may be influenced by the perspective I brought to a historically male tradition. It was interesting to note that *samba* and *capoeira*, both Brazilian dance forms, are bipolar. Traditionally, *Samba* was practiced mostly by women and *capoeira* mostly by men. It took ages to cross these gendered cultural barriers. Finally, in *capoeira*, women have come to be accepted as equal players, and there is much evidence of this in the classes and in the interviews. *Mestre* says it once would

have been unusual for women to practice *capoeira*. In much earlier times, women were expected to stay home and take care of families and that men were expected to work hard and play hard, at *capoeira*, for example. He says that once *capoeira* became the national sport of Brazil in 1974, women began learning it. In *capoeira*, it does not matter whether you are a woman. *Mestre* says women often learn and master movements more rapidly than men. He says that perhaps the reason is that as women struggle to gain equality in cultures around the world their increasing will to fight serves them at sports such as *capoeira*. If this fighting spirit is a trend in other contexts of struggle, then perhaps this cultural expression is one of Brazil's particular demonstrations of women's progress.

Communicating manners

The very act of exercise and attempting mastery of an acrobatic or gymnastic move appears to bond the group of students in a class into a whole simply made up of individuals of varying levels of ability and motivated everyone to want to perform more and at a higher level. Everyone seemed driven to do their best for himself or herself and for everyone else. It seemed that each individual's success was the group's success, and that the whole group's success was each individual's success. This was communicated outwardly in two ways: by the expressed interest in one another's well-being and performance, and in the express desire to do one's best, no matter the level of proficiency.

Mestre says he does not believe in holding separate classes for beginners and advanced players. He says he believes people learn from each other and that beginners advance more rapidly when they are among and can observe the best. This communicating or modeling of behavior inspires beginners to want to improve and

become known as advanced as quickly as possible. Members of the *capoeira* academy act in this social phenomenon as if they are members of the same family, growing together, celebrating together, helping one another, whether they are the best or the beginners. The day I attended class with just one other student who was an advanced player, we ended the session with the congratulatory “Good class!” Yes, it was a good class. I understand better why *Mestre*’s philosophy is to bring beginners and the advanced into the same class and into the same physical conversation. Beginners learn via this communication to set their goals and ambitions higher, according to another’s abilities.

During the class when the 2-year-old boy joined the *roda* and began spinning and kicking, his sister and the grownups clapped to the rhythm of the *capoeira* music and applauded him. *Capoeira* was teaching respect for everybody, older and younger, beginners and advanced. Everybody had the same right to perform and be respected for his or her abilities.

The touching of hands between *capoeiristas* that precedes each play in the *roda* was not quite a handshake, but rather a hand touching. In this, they appear to be acknowledging each other as friends before the dance or fight begins. As the music plays and the *capoeiristas* square off against each other, the real fun, the thrill, the excitement of *capoeira* begins for all the students. The anticipation rises during the two hours of exercising and preparation that open the class. Observing how people treat each other as they depart the *roda* after a competition with their opponent reminds me of what I had read once about *capoeira*. *Mestre Bimba* had said that he was drinking beer and having fun at night in the local pub with his worst enemies from the *roda*. I experience the same. I see people who are full rivals inside the *roda* being best friends outside it. Everybody

has her or his own style, and by watching people playing *capoeira*, others can tell about the player's personality, whether he or she is an aggressive or a defensive person, whether he or she has had a bad or a good day. It is a way of communicating character.

The salutation that closes the play of *capoeira* in the *roda* at the end of each class is a kick movement accompanied by the shouting of “*Axe*,” meaning “peace,” which is directed at the *mestre*. It is an act of giving humble thanks to the *mestre* for his teaching. *Capoeira* is not only a form of exercise for the body, but also an exercise for the mind, teaching not only self confidence, but also respect for others, especially for the *mestre* in return for his giving knowledge.

Communicating confidence

Initially practicing *capoeira* movements and struggling with doubt and fear about one's ability is a lesson in achieving self-confidence. *Capoeira* cultivates not just stronger bodies, but also stronger minds. This is depicted dramatically in the 1983 *capoeira* movie “Only the Strong.” *Mestre* teaches belief in one's self, to love one's self in order to break through not only at *capoeira* skills, but also at everything in life. When I saw others able to perform moves I was afraid to attempt, I set my mind in a more positive mode and did it myself. It makes sense that beginners and the advanced are placed in the same group. The best communicate their abilities very well, and whenever someone else was unable to achieve a particular move, everyone else would try to show and teach that person how. Everyone was shown respect, even the newest person in any class. Brazilians are widely known as very friendly people, and that cultural fact is evident in a *capoeira* class. Through *capoeira* – rooted in the martial arts – people

compete against each other, oppose each other, but at the same time are teaching and helping one another to improve, to survive in this cultural realm.

Participating in *capoeira*, though exhausting, also makes one feel more energetic. Perhaps this is why *capoeira* suddenly seems to be the latest trend in physical and mental fitness. During each class, *Mestre* devotes at least five minutes of lecturing on life and believing in one's self. I felt a difference in myself after just one class: a confidence not only about *capoeira* but about other things I was doing or intended to do. Was this because of the intense physical training, or because of the positive, encouraging atmosphere in the class, surrounded by very friendly people? Even *Mestre's* 10-year-old son could offer helpful advice about having self-confidence. Age does not matter after all. People in the *roda* do not look at each other as older or younger.

Coming together

Viewing *Mestre's capoeira* video, I could imagine myself included in such a video one day, participating in demonstrations and becoming part of a small community in which the members conversed with one another through both the physical act of *capoeira* and the socializing that often preceded and followed the classes and demonstrations. It was enough make me want to begin classes immediately, at the next session. It is easy to be drawn to the warmth in the way people treated each other. They might have been opponents in the *roda*, but they were friends outside it. They competed, but by competing in this form of play, they were actually helping each other to improve at *capoeira*. Many of these people had come to central Florida from Brazil, but others had not. That does not seem to matter; they are all treating one another the same way. Those who do not speak Portuguese well are still able to use some Portuguese words. For

example, during the warm-up exercises, all count aloud in Portuguese. *Capoeira* in this setting is obviously an exportation of Brazilian culture, including by way of the Portuguese tongue. *Capoeira* brings Brazil outside its borders and to other, foreign cultures. A small group of people whose native tongue is either English, Portuguese, Spanish, or even French can come together in one place, in this academy, in this class. They are brought together by one thing: *capoeira*. This Brazilian cultural artifact unites this small group of people here and no doubt in many other places.

This unifying a community through the *capoeira* class has deep cultural roots in *capoeira*'s origins. *Capoeira*, as we know, originated during the Portuguese oppression in Brazil during the sixteenth century. Slaves learned and practiced *capoeira* in their villages as a way of surviving and, it is believed, preparing to rebel, to perhaps one day fight back, break out, escape as a unified people. The unification promoted by *capoeira*, since its roots, and even this idea of unifying people is at the very heart of *capoeira*.

The involvement and interest among adults and their children indicates that *capoeira* is also a family activity. Father and mothers and their children communicate respect and harmony through the warm-up, the exercises, the practice, of the movements. They are learning much about each other in this way. Parents teach their children, are motivated to become more energetic and give more from themselves to the game. At the same time, as *Mestre*'s 10-year-old son demonstrated, parents learn the same things from children. Since many of those present at various times in this academy start learning at an early age, eventually they will become part of it, and *capoeira* will become their life. The family connection becomes the endless, harmonious circle represented at the *roda*.

Not just family, but also strangers constantly come together and communicate unity through the *capoeira* experience. The day I waited in my car for class to begin and had a conversation with a near-stranger from class, I realized that I did not even know his name, but it did not matter because we had *capoeira* in common. Likewise, when *Mestre's* son followed his father's lead and exchanged with me the traditional hug and kiss, it did not matter to him who I was. It was enough that I was there because of *capoeira*. When I walked into the library one night after class and became the center of a discussion about *capoeira*, I realized that if I had not been wearing the outfit, no one would have mentioned it. The spectacle of the outfit stimulated the conversation, which in turn led me to meet new people and introduced some of them to *capoeira*.

When the young man from New Jersey showed up one day, and played the *pandeiro*, and practiced with us, everybody treated him as if they knew him forever. He had never played *capoeira* with any of these people, but they understood each other and played as if they were doing it together in every class. He was leaving the next day back to New Jersey, we all wished him good luck and that was really nice to meet him and play with him. This was how *capoeira* was the reason for making new friends. If not for *capoeira* we would not have ever met this man, but now through *capoeira* we had a friend from New Jersey.

I once used to practice another group sport, and the *capoeira* demonstration reminds me of the times after practices, when we would all stay together, go somewhere afterward, drink coffee, talk. One single communicative act, such as group sport, is able to unite and get people closer, make friends and acquaintances between people that all they knew when they met was that sport. There is such a power in such group happenings

that I could feel the vibration of *capoeira* in the air, guiding all these people to the same goal, to do more and do better, to promote their culture, attract more people to it. Once I started the classes, I quit going to the gym. The difference in the two experiences was significant. In the gym, one can feel isolated even though surrounded by others in the same pursuit. Most exercise routines can be performed alone. Even exercise classes such as aerobics or pilates, while conducted in groups, require neither a partner nor assistance. In this way, gym routines are like line dancing: a community of people dancing together, but alone. In a *capoeira* class, even when I was one of just two people, I was neither alone nor lonely. I was connected to the other, in need of the other, and communicating verbally and non-verbally – through the play – with the other. *Capoeira* brings people together, and its expressive form is pure communication.

There are many reasons for people to communicate, to get to know about each other's existence; it just depends on the social group. For example, if not for *capoeira*, I wouldn't have ever met these people, I wouldn't have ever known about this event or experienced it as a social and communicative event, and I wouldn't have experienced many such other events yet to come into my life as a result of it.

One night, it was already dark outside when I left, but I could see that there were still some people inside the academy warehouse, showing each other different movements and in no rush to leave and go their separate ways. One more time I realized that this place was the place for these people to meet. They had one thing in common, which kept them together: *capoeira*.

Communicating Brazil

More than anything, *capoeira* communicates aspects of Brazilian culture. It is, after all, their export. The mundane ritual of exercises that begins each class, even the practice of the most basic of *capoeira* movements, is the start of a journey that puts one closer and closer to not only that art, but – because it was a Brazilian cultural expression – to Brazil itself. Would an interest in and practice of some Asian martial art make one feel closer to Asian culture? Probably. The export of a cultural phenomenon not only distinguishes that particular culture but also promotes it to the rest of the world.

In this, *capoeira* is not only a cultural communicator, representing Brazil to the world, but also a communicator between different people, from different nationalities and backgrounds. In this academy, there are people ages 2 years old and up to 45 years of age. Males and females, people with different shapes, some very athletic, others not in such great shape. Some Brazilians sometimes see *capoeira* discriminately. They look upon it with the same eyes as they would look at voodoo or *macumba*, black magic. This is what *Mestre* meant when saying that non-Brazilian practitioners tend to take greater care of *capoeira* than do Brazilians, even though in Brazil *capoeira* is part of their everyday lives. Perhaps that is because in countries where *capoeira* is a cultural import, less – or even nothing – is known about its outlaw history and association with human misery and rebelliousness.

It is well known that Brazilian culture is deeply Christianized, and the Brazilian population itself is 90 percent Catholic. The Brazilian people hold strong beliefs and follow their religion strictly. It is natural that *capoeira* should incorporate some aspects since it is a cultural phenomenon, typical to this country. Catholicism, however, is

noticeably absent when *capoeira* is viewed through a religious lens. At most, some of the instruments used to make *capoeira* music may bear ancient religious symbols, but these are mostly pagan signs incorporating animal worship rooted in African tribal traditions. The presence and symbolism of the circle in which the *roda* is played out implies some of these ancient rituals, including the anticipation and celebration of the hunt, as described in Chapter 1. During this research, however, there were no detectable signs of Christianity. In fact, if anything, the belief promoted is in one's self or in a fellow human's skills and wisdom rather than a belief in any higher power.

One of the few words the 2-year-old boy at the classes knew to speak was "*capoeira*," and he knew the difference between the sounds of *capoeira* songs and all the others. Even here in central Florida, this little boy was growing up with *capoeira* all around. He was born in the United States with a Brazilian father, so his blood was Brazilian, his culture was Brazilian. He was growing up in the Brazilian way through *capoeira*.

I had never played the *pandeiro* and was waiting for *Mestre* to teach me sometime. Then one day, a young girl just grabbed the instrument and started playing, as if it were the most natural thing for her to do when there was somebody performing *capoeira*. Her father was from a Brazilian family, but she had been born in the United States. Brazilian culture was in her blood, no matter where she was born or where she was living. Probably *capoeira* was a big part of her young life. She spoke mostly English but knew a few words in Portuguese. *Capoeira* came naturally to her, something that she encountered every day of her life.

From the young Brazilian native who showed up early for the demonstration, I learned that Brazilians are virtually born into *capoeira*; they say it is in their blood. It is practiced or performed everywhere, all the time: on pavement, on the beach. Some people in Brazil live for *capoeira*; in their free time they play *capoeira* and socialize with others who do the same. Some people are born into families that play it every day. Some have learned it from their fathers, some in schools. Before *capoeira* became the official national sport, people learned it on the street from their friends and fathers. He says it is culturally assumed among people in Brazil, because it is everywhere and such a part of everyday life. It makes Brazilian culture and everyday life sound appealing to me. Instead of learning through a formal class, if one wants to practice and experience it, she or he can just go outside and find that *capoeira* is going to be happening for sure somewhere.

The music, the dance, the *capoeiristas* themselves promote a culture different from the one surrounding the neighborhood in which the academy is located. Even the feel of the *atabaque*, made of natural materials coming from somewhere far away, with the purpose to perform these sounds, not familiar to many people, is exotic to some, very familiar to others, the ones coming from this culture.

CONCLUSION

This cultural study of *capoeira* extends the lineage of scholarship represented in the seminal work by Geertz's thick description of deep play. By observing and participating in *capoeira* and by talking with its practitioners, I was able to immerse myself, within relative limits discussed below, in the culture; to examine *capoeira*'s movements, fashions, and manners; and to analyze what it communicates about the culture in which it originated more than 400 years ago in Brazil and about the culture in which, as an export, it is practiced outside Brazil.

Capoeira shares some of the Balinese ritual's traits: gender exclusivity at their origin and for several hundred years, and at least a representational form of combat. In *capoeira*, however, the end is just a metaphorical death, and the real meaning is more similar to freedom and liberation: liberation from slavery, the poverty of everyday life, from the ghosts of Portuguese oppressors in Sixteenth-Century Brazil. Moreover, *capoeira* has truly evolved from its violent origin in misery and suffering to a modern-day spectacle of athleticism and art, a non-contact sport communicating only positive cultural expressions.

When analyzing the communicative aspects among *capoeira* and Brazilian and other societies, it is necessary to confront the problems of meaning that result from the different social contexts of that particular phenomenon. *Capoeira* means different things to people in Salvador, for example, than it does to those in the interior of Bahia and definitely different things to those from other cultures and in other countries. Outside Brazil, *capoeira* is manifest mostly in academies created and operated by masters of *capoeira* and peopled by students attracted for a number of reasons. They may be

expatriate Brazilians following their homeland culture, even though living in a different country. Or they may be foreigners to Brazil but attracted to another culture by simply become part of something typical to it, such as *capoeira*.

The academy where I conducted my research has students from different countries, backgrounds, and cultures. One cultural fascination is with how people from different parts of the world may be united at one point by the same interests and disregard everything else about what differentiates them. As in this case, many of the *capoeiristas* are not from Brazil but they are gathered there all for the same reason: *capoeira*. If not for *capoeira*, probably most of these people would have never met, I would have never met them. Capoeira is the means of communication between all these representatives of different cultures, the mean they have in common.

Capoeira communicates Brazilian culture and history. Even though its roots may lie in slavery and misery and suffering, its current expression as an art form retrieves, revives, and redeems *capoeira* as a way of communicating several positive, beautiful, and desirable aspects of human experience: the grace and precision of movement; the discipline and uniformity of those movements and even of fashion and manners; and the unifying of people, the building of community.

Jennifer spoke of *capoeira*'s expression of ancient Brazilian history and culture. Some movements symbolized those the slaves had devised. For example, even when their hands were cuffed, they could still walk and jump and spin and kick — but without using their arms. Remnants of the idea behind these movements of struggle and resistance can be seen in contemporary *capoeira* movements. She demonstrated a few, and it was easy to see her point. *Capoeira* has evolved; more refined acrobatic movements have been

introduced. The effect has been to move *capoeira* from the negative connotation of slavery and suffering to a popular, graceful cultural art. This does not deny *capoeira* or Brazilians their roots but rather pays homage to those roots. Rather than communicate and prolong a history of misery, modern-day *capoeira* as Brazilian cultural export has created a beautiful cultural artifact from those roots, showing they have been overcome but not forgotten. Thus it is with *capoeira*'s enduring legacy as an expression of Brazilian culture.

Limitations of the study.

This research and subsequent analysis are limited by the constraints of time, place, and method. As a graduate student with limited means of finance and transportation, I needed to restrict my study to a convenient location and a shorter time frame than a full ethnography suggests. It might have been interesting, and the findings and analysis no doubt would have been much different, had I been able to travel to Brazil and observe *capoeira* in its original setting. But in the global village, the observation and analysis of *capoeira* in a foreign setting is just as valid a study for what I intended to study: what *capoeira* communicates.

Future research.

Capoeira is present throughout the world. It would be valuable to know how *capoeira* is performed and represented in other academies not only in the United States but also in other countries. *Capoeira* first entered the United States through San Francisco and through New York City 30 years ago; it might be interesting to study it there and even to compare and contrast *capoeira* there with the way in which it

communicates culture in newer locales. Does it promote Brazilian culture everywhere else, the same as it does here? Is it related elsewhere to Brazilian culture or do people accept it as simply another martial arts form? The sporting side of *capoeira* suggests potential health benefits that might be studied, particularly in American communities where the culture of the upscale gym or health club might intimidate expatriate Brazilians not yet assimilated into the Americanized culture of the body. This could lead to a completely different direction for studying *capoeira*, not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a practical means toward better health.

APPENDIX











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