

Introduction

I was tempted to quit capoeira once and for all following a grueling class with Mestre Boca do Rio, the leader of Grupo Zimba in Salvador, Brazil. I was frustrated to feel that I was not improving after seven years of dedicating my life to the practice of capoeira Angola. Every time I played with Boca, I just couldn't get anything past him. He was too experienced and was always one step ahead of me. To make matters worse, in the *rodas* (weekly gatherings) of the group, I was always afraid of playing with him, even though I knew him very well and we were friends. My fear in the *roda* also extended to other *mestres* and advanced practitioners—not to all, of course, but to a great majority of them. Why was I afraid? What situations did capoeira create around these persons that made me feel hopeless and filled with fear?

I shared my feeling with Boca days later, after he convinced me not to quit capoeira. He mentioned that it was normal to feel afraid when facing a *mestre* or somebody with more experience. Fear was part of a student's apprenticeship. This strange feeling of fear came out of respect and deference to a person who has more knowledge than you, he said. He also said that fear was the evidence of power. Even he felt a great apprehension any time somebody mentioned the name of his *mestre*, Moraes, even though he had cut all ties with the *mestre* in 1996 and they had not spoken since.

To hear that Boca do Rio, a skilled capoeira *mestre* who instills such respect in others, was also subject to the same fear that I experienced made me wonder about how far and deep go the power relations that exist among leaders, particularly among those who dedicate their lives to teach and practice capoeira as a way of life. What connections, divisions, alliances, and disputes does capoeira Angola create?

The story of Boca do Rio is a good example of the hard path of apprenticeship for a person who decides to become a *mestre*. He started capoeira at a young age and, in the mid 1980s, decided to enroll at the Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho (GCAP; Capoeira Angola Group

from Pelourinho). He was a member of GCAP until 1996, when he abandoned the group.

In the 1980s the practice of capoeira Angola was very different. According to Boca, there were just a few practicing groups and players worked closely with their *mestres*. The *mestres* did not spend half of the year traveling all over the world, as they do today. In some cases, members considered their groups to be their extended family, with the *mestres* taking the roles of mentors and guides. Boca, together with other students who are now famous *mestres*, learned the GCAP way, which includes strict discipline, rigor, and self-awareness of the importance of being part of an Afro-Brazilian tradition. All of these persons started from scratch, as nobodies in a world that historically and systematically discriminated against them. Part of the success of these individuals can be traced back to their training with the GCAP under the command of Mestre Moraes. There were other *mestres* at the time, including João Grande, João Pequeno, and Cobra Mansa, but Boca and the other GCAP members considered Moraes to be the most influential *mestre* in their lives.

Boca do Rio was one of the last members of the 1980s generation to leave the group. One by one, all these excellent players either deserted the GCAP because of the overbearing personality of Moraes or because Moraes expelled them. They formed new groups and cut all ties with their *mestre*. Boca never wanted to leave the GCAP, but said that he was forced to. Moraes was a charismatic figure and an imposing one. Control was exhibited via a nonnegotiable set of rules with which all members of his academy had to abide. Respect to the *mestre* became a synonym for blind deference.

The separation was not amicable. Moraes accused many of his ex-students of betrayal, of leaving the true path of capoeira Angola to pursue selfish interests. Today, he does not consider them to be true bearers of the capoeira Angola tradition, and he did not grant them the titles of *mestres*. It was not until the mid 2000s that Boca and his peers were finally rewarded with the titles of *mestre* by their other mentor of capoeira Angola at GCAP, Mestre Cobra Mansa, who had also left the group in 1994.

This broken chain of power is not uncommon in the capoeira Angola academies I studied. I have collected many similar stories that show the complexities of the *mestre*–student relationship in Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and elsewhere. Although there is no single cause that could explain the way *mestres* behave with their students, in all cases the power of the *mestres* is not disputed by the members of the group. People who

do not belong to the group may question the authority and the moral grounds of certain *mestres*, but within these academies nobody doubts the *mestre*. The *mestre's* power is evident, unquestionable, and always demonstrated in practice and performance, which are means of instilling not only respect and admiration, but also fear. Power is, in essence, pragmatic.

Power in Practice

Some of the most important issues discussed in this book relate to the themes of power, adherence to a tradition, deference, practice, and the dialectics between the individual and the collective. In essence, the book is about the concept of power and how it is conceived, learned, and performed by capoeira Angola *mestres*. My main argument states that, in order to understand the world of capoeira Angola, one must necessarily focus on the cosmological and practical connotations of power and how power shapes social relations. I argue that focusing the argument of the book on power provides a better comprehension about the process of transmitting knowledge and consolidating an Afro-Brazilian tradition in a globalized world.

I describe power relations, knowledge, and tradition from the point of view of the *mestres*. Although I often talk generally about *mestres* as if they were all the same, the word has to be considered heuristically because it denotes a diversity of contrasting personal views and attitudes about capoeira Angola.

To base a book on the role played by powerful leaders implies a male-centered perspective, since the vast majority of capoeira Angola leaders are men. However, women do take part in the practice and are as important in today's capoeira groups as any other practitioner.¹ There is at least one group led mainly by women—Grupo Nzinga.² The leaders of Grupo Nzinga have strived to attain recognition of women as figures of power in capoeira.³ In other cases in Salvador and elsewhere, women play a huge role in the development and preservation of the Angola tradition. The influence of foreign students has been of extreme importance in the slow process of recognizing gender equality in capoeira, although this process has never run smoothly and is not easily accepted by many male leaders (see Griffith 2016).

My ethnography follows a tradition in capoeira studies influenced mainly by the classic works of Lowell Lewis (1992) and Greg Downey

(2005), two of the most prominent anthropologists in the capoeira research field. I argue that Lewis's and Downey's approaches, although of great value, omit relevant aspects that need to be addressed. In the case of Greg Downey, he does not explicitly describe the conflicting social relations and internal hierarchical politics of the practice, which results in a narrative favoring a more experiential and individual account of the practice that does not give full justice to the specificities of the local political milieu of capoeira academies. There is nothing wrong with an experiential approach in anthropology, but the experience must be connected to the realm of local social relations in order to become more meaningful.

Lewis, on the other hand, contends that capoeira should be viewed as a text to be interpreted based on a semiotic framework. Although I sympathize with the different levels of signification analyzed by Lewis, I suggest that an analytical approach to capoeira runs the risk of diminishing the importance of difference and the practical and cosmological contrast of styles. I believe that attending to the specificities of every style will bring our understanding closer to the local anthropological perspective of capoeira.

In the growing bibliography available on capoeira, one commonly finds that style differentiation does not play an essential analytical role (Araújo Caires 2006; Barbosa 2005a, 2005b; Hedegard 2012; MacLennan 2011; Rector 2008; Reis 2000). This does not mean that academics are unaware of these differences; other studies show how capoeira has been divided into styles and consider Regional, Contemporary, and Angola modalities in a context of global expression (Delamont and Stephens 2007, 2008; Falcão 2005; Farias and Vilodre 2007; Fonseca 2008; Griffith 2016; Guizardi 2011; Magalhães 2011).

In some cases, differentiation may not play a part in the development of an author's theoretical argument, and thus that author is justified in not considering the different modalities. In many ways, some of the assumptions I make could be easily applied to any capoeira style. In other ways, it is crucial to consider the distinct aspects of capoeira Angola.

I conceive capoeira Angola as building a world in itself because of the particular positioning of capoeira Angola *mestres* compared to *mestres* in other styles. In Salvador I found that *mestres* make a clear-cut differentiation between the Angola style they practice and the styles practiced by capoeira Regional *mestres*. For Angola *mestres* this distinction is of paramount importance. Perceiving capoeira Angola as distinct

from the other two styles is the starting point to analyzing the process of knowledge creation and to creating a description of the local tradition.

To focus on difference implies a statement in favor of radical alterity. By showing the particularities of capoeira Angola as a unifying practice, I intend to provide a total vision of this style. At the same time, I outline the issue of political discrepancy within capoeira Angola groups as a central aspect of the practice.

A World in Itself

Considering capoeira Angola as a world in itself means to see it in a holistic way. I take the idea from the perspective of the *mestres* with whom I worked. For them, capoeira Angola is an essential part of their lives: whatever they think, dream, and do is always connected to the practice of the Afro-Brazilian art. It looks as if *mestres* were suited with a particular and exclusive worldview that could not be shared with people who do not practice capoeira.

I consider capoeira Angola to be a ritual practice that can be explained in its own terms and in its own right. I take this stance from the work of Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (2005), who argued that the scope of ritual can be understood in its own terms by focusing on the potential that certain ritual practices have to create particular worlds. Whether or not these worlds are real, the idea allows for the potential of any ritual to create its own reality. This potential is what Bruce Kapferer called “virtuality” (Kapferer 2007) when he described the capacity to make things creatively possible in ritual.

Explaining a ritual like capoeira Angola in its own terms means to conceive it beyond functional modes of explanation. Functional modes normally explain rituals by making them exclusively the products of more-general social causes. Under this view, ritual is seen as a cathartic phenomenon—a way of coping with stress, frustration, violence, anger, and so on.

My perspective runs against this functional and simplistic solution. I see capoeira as a microcosmos that contains social relations that, in many cases, exist in tension with the sociohistorical formation of Bahian society. It is common to find that *mestres* make extraordinary efforts to build a virtual barrier around capoeira in order to keep it separated from non-Afro-Brazilian practices. These efforts are perhaps a way of preserving a distinctive tradition. In a world where competition, tourism,

and global influences play an important role in the success or failure of an academy, keeping a tradition close to its Afro-Brazilian roots is essential.

In recent years, however, the global exposure of the Angola style has reconfigured the way *mestres* interact with the world beyond the premises of their academies. They are at a crossroad that requires negotiating with followers of other styles and accommodating people who are interested in knowing the “secrets” of capoeira Angola. They also have to confront the competition and mistrust that exists among capoeira Angola practitioners.

Be that as it may, I find that the effort *mestres* make in order to create modes of identification among capoeira Angola practitioners is particularly important. In Salvador, *mestres* have been increasingly preoccupied with being considered the true caretakers of tradition, particularly among foreign students who wish to see the “real” capoeira Angola in one of its places of origin. By closing in on itself, capoeira Angola has been able to build up a context that is separate from other capoeira styles and Afro-Brazilian practices.

The Scope of Creativity: Dialectics between the Individual and the Collective

There is a dialectic oscillation between the individual power embodied by the *mestres* and the collective conventions of capoeira Angola formed by a community of participants. In this book I want to show the mutual interdependency between the individual and the collective in capoeira Angola without trying to solve anthropology’s fundamental problem with the opposition between social constraints and individual action.⁴ For example, the social context of capoeira is affected by the individual agency executed by a powerful person. This social context is formed by a collective tradition that dictates the structuring of groups should conform to hierarchies that recognize the holders of knowledge. This organization is vital to the power relations that *mestres* have with other individuals.

Interdependency between individual invention and collective conventions means that one part of the relation cannot exist without the other. This book emphasizes the part of the *mestres* and their individual, creative forms of powerful actions without neglecting the importance of the social collective conventions in which they are performed.⁵ This

dialectical move between the individual and the collective provides an excellent starting point for exploring the *mestres'* perceptions about their practice.

In general, *mestres* assume that their personal power is responsible for the collective forms of the game's inner social structure. Thus, for *mestres* of capoeira and their supporters, the inner power that shapes their own playful microcosm has its origin not in the all-encompassing structures and solidarity of Bahian society at large, but in a secretive and socially elusive magical source accessible only by themselves. I discuss this spiritual domain in detail during the description of the cosmological connotations of power in chapter 4. For the time being, it is enough to say that the *mestres'* self-perception defines the outcome of ritual actions as a thing that emerges from their creative engagement with the world.

In this sense, the creative power of the *mestres* evokes Hans Joas's pragmatic theory of creative action (Joas 1996), which holds that action is not something teleological or rationally motivated by normative schemes. For Joas,⁶ action must be creative and phenomenologically uncertain concerning where it will lead. Although *mestres* may have an idea of the source of their power relations, they cannot control completely the outcomes and results of such actions and they cannot control the intentions of those who take actions against them. In chapter 3 we will see how this uncertain control serves as a platform to the concept of bodily closure as a form of protecting power.

The creative assumption of individual power and its dialectic negotiation with collective conventions is intrinsically related to the dialectic anthropology of Roy Wagner, who considers that the cornerstone of anthropology resides in the relationship between conventional and individual (nonconventional) models of symbolization (Wagner 1981).⁷ Following Wagner, it is possible to identify the pole of individual invention with the body and power of a *mestre*, and perceive this identification as a unified, singular entity. The privileged way to show this power is by means of performance. It is in practice that a *mestre* displays his knowledge, reveals his powerful attributes, and defines his role as a man who belongs to a tradition.

This is why I consider the *mestres* of capoeira to be inventors of culture in Wagner's terms. They serve as mediators between conventional and nonconventional models of symbolization. They are individuals who see that their inner magical power is responsible for the creation of a community of practitioners and its existing rules. Therefore, at the in-

terior of capoeira there is a power defined by its apparent social excess; this power is projected into the hierarchies that determine the relationships within Angola academies. By considering this excess to emerge from individual power, we can understand the vignette narrated at the beginning of the introduction, wherein Mestre Boca do Rio is describing as having felt the overbearing presence of his *mestre* to be oppressing and debilitating. Another form of powerful agency is expressed by the feeling of fear and frustration that individuals face when they have to deal with powerful adversaries in the *roda*.

The Nature of Power and Its Agency

Mestres see the social as an extension of themselves in the sense that they use their power to justify their transcendence of the hierarchy that they impose on others. One could call this power spiritual, supernatural, or charismatic (Weber 1922/1978: 241). It is a form of power that grows with time and experience. A *mestre* earns or accumulates his power through practicing capoeira and by getting involved in a certain religious context. Only on a few occasions did I hear remarks about *mestres* whose power was considered to be a part of their nature. On the contrary, a *mestre* becomes powerful through a long, ascetic process of apprenticeship. The apprenticeship includes suffering under the overbearing and excessive power of a prominent *mestre*.

A *mestre*, therefore, has the capacity to make others follow and respect him. His primary tools are his body and his knowledge, which are the containers of his power. Subsequently, it is in the practice of capoeira that a *mestre* makes evident his powerful attributes. As many *mestres* have told me, it is the quality of one's skills or music capabilities that determine the respect and admiration of others. The focus on the body as a source and receptacle of the magical and creative forces involved in performance transforms an initial metaphysical conception of power into a real, concrete fact that lacks transcendence: *mestres* are the embodiment of power.

Yet *mestres* must face leaders who are equally or more powerful. Therefore, rivalries emerge as a consequence of their social relations; these rivalries cause the formation of lineages. These lineages provide a mental and practical control following the practitioner's adscription to a particular tradition of knowledge. They act as a form of hierarchical differentiation, too. The supernatural origins of *mestres'* power is com-

plemented by the collective forms of adscription represented by lines of descent.

By supernatural or spiritual power, I mean that certain energy goes beyond the materiality of *mestres'* bodies, but that is expressed through bodily action. This power is at once cosmological and pragmatic. To say that power is spiritual does not mean that it necessarily has its origin exclusively in Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé. In some cases, particularly with leaders who are practitioners of these religions, there is an evident connection between Candomblé and capoeira. Yet, there are Protestant and even evangelic *mestres* who are trying to remove from their practice any association with Afro-Brazilian religions, but who still ascribe spiritual powers to the practice of capoeira. In chapter 3 I will give a more detailed explanation of the links between capoeira and spirituality.

In practice, power has an agency that affects humans and nonhumans. Leaders consider this agency to be another way to make power evident. The agency of power blurs distinctions so that musical instruments may become persons who cry, send messages, and participate in a *mestre's* power, as I will show in chapter 6. Power also affects the feelings and emotions of adversaries; *mestres* instill fear, as I described earlier. They can make people sick or vulnerable. Agency is the way power operates as a marker for both those who have proper knowledge and those who do not. Therefore, agency is at the core of the dialectic move between the individual and the collective. It moves and transforms relations; it is ontologically designed and epistemologically assimilated. It emerges from the ritual scope of capoeira Angola, which is able to create a world in itself.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 describes the history of capoeira Angola in Salvador, Bahia. The purpose of this historical description is to show how capoeira Angola became institutionalized in academies and structured as a distinctive practice. I pay particular attention to the role that *mestres* played in this historical process and how they assumed responsibility for how capoeira Angola has developed into the practice we see today. In the chapter I do not undertake a study about origins. I try to speculate as little as possible about the African sources of capoeira and focus more on the complementary dialogue be-

tween historians and capoeira experts. As much as I could, I tried to bring to light the struggles that *mestres* faced in order to consolidate their style in a world in which they were always considered a minority. The chapter thus also is a tale of the *mestres*' prowess and determination.

Chapter 2 focuses on the sociology of capoeira Angola groups in Salvador and their collective conventions. I delve into the scope of social relations, how a community of participants is created around the *mestres* in Salvador, and why the social aspects of this community are meaningful for anthropology. In the chapter I describe in detail the elements that make capoeira Angola a world in itself. My aim is to show the general structures of academies, as well as the relations that leaders have among themselves and with other practitioners. I also draw on the distinctiveness of capoeira Angola compared to the other capoeira styles (Regional and Contemporary) and the reasons behind this distinction. I define the capoeira Angola community (CAC) as a matrix composed by lineages that *mestres* use as a form of legitimation of belonging to a common tradition.

The objective of chapter 3⁸ is to describe the relationship between embodiment, cosmology, and spirituality among capoeira Angola leaders. I draw on my ethnographic material and experience as practitioner for this purpose. The central focus of the chapter is on the process of learning capoeira and the arduous physical labor that this implies. I argue in favor of understanding capoeira by categorizing it under three main levels: embodiment, symbolic connotations of the body, and cosmological principles. My intention is not to describe how a novice or an initial student learns this ritual art form, but rather how an apprentice becomes a *mestre* and, subsequently, how a *mestre* sees the world from a position of power and knowledge. For this purpose I engage with the concept of the *corpo fechado* (closed body) as a local ethnographic concept that serves to make visible the connections between practice, cosmology, and embodiment. Finally, I describe the complex relation that exists between capoeira and Candomblé as belonging to a common plural cosmological matrix. In the case of capoeira Angola, Candomblé complements the practice's spiritual and religious foundations. I also note how the spirituality in capoeira differs from that of Candomblé in many aspects.

Chapter 4⁹ analyzes the issue of power based on the ethnographic context of capoeira Angola academies. The chapter describes the concept of *mandinga* as an indigenous form of power. I argue that *mandinga* gives further proof of the importance of practice in a ritual art

form, since this concept shapes social relations, bodily interactions, magic acts, and the definition of personhood. The argument of the chapter centers on the logic of deception as one of the exclusive ways of expressing *mandinga*. I describe how the previous discussion on cosmology and embodiment appears as the base on which *mandinga* becomes evident. I propose to see the effects of *mandinga* in the bodies of the *mestres* as an ethnographic strategy to discuss the ontology of deception as the principle of capoeira Angola's practice.

Chapter 5 discusses the violent and playful sides of capoeira Angola and the ethical scope of its practice. I engage with the concepts of symbolic violence, performance, and play, and discuss the conundrum that *mestres* face between deception and morality. On the one hand, playful violence entails simulation, cheating, and betrayal. On the other hand, it also implies a rejection of seriousness and a strategy of shrewdness and cunning that has been defined by Roberto DaMatta (1991) as a characteristically Brazilian trait through the concept of *malandragem* (roguery). In this chapter, I undertake a further analysis of deception and the kind of ethical framework it creates, as well as how *mestres* have dealt with deception in the past and in the present. I argue that playfulness brings an aesthetic expression of power through deception, which defines the pragmatic character of capoeira Angola.

The aim of chapter 6¹⁰ is to show the importance of music in academies and in capoeira performances. My main concern in this last chapter is with materiality and the aesthetic effect that music produces in participants. I draw on recent anthropological discussions about the potential of material culture to redefine anthropology from relational and ontological perspectives. My objective is to show how particular musical instruments become persons and how the power of personification is crucial to understanding the relations that a *mestre* builds with his tradition. *Mestres* activate the power of personification and, through music, make evident their position in the hierarchy of knowledge. I see music as essential for the creation of an aesthetic perception of capoeira, as a key component of its magic and spiritual connotations, and as a thing that involves collective and individual forms of symbolization.

The overall aim of this book is not only to describe capoeira from the *mestres'* points of view, but also to show how individual power shapes the configuration of a community of participants. My central point is to highlight the importance of ritual practice in the development of an ethnographic strategy that takes seriously the key role of capoeira leaders. I consider that power is elicited through creative action and shown

to others; performance is the means by which a *mestre* convinces, entices, and (ultimately) deceives the opponent.

Notes

1. In order to stress the relevance of women in capoeira Angola, I use the feminine or masculine third person pronoun when I talk about members of the groups.
2. This name is from the Angolan African queen Anna Nzinga, who is considered to be an icon against oppression.
3. Relevant to the discussion of gender relations in capoeira are the important works of Araújo Caires 2006; Barbosa 2005a; Griffith 2016; Guizardi 2011; Hedegard 2012; Joseph 2005; and Zonzon 2014. Their works not only show in detail the way relations exist between men and women in capoeira groups, but also highlight the importance of a female perspective on capoeira studies, which is something that, until recently, was marginal and rare.
4. It is not easy to give a definitive statement about the level, quality, and intensity of the mutual influences among the collective conventions of society and the individual invention of culture. On the one hand, a social determinacy over individual actions and behaviors, like the traditional sociological approach of Durkheim (1995), could undermine the agency that individual actors have over the structures in which they live. On the other hand, a voluntaristic approach, like the one proposed by Nigel Rapport (2003), might run the risk of overshadowing the cultural and social conformations that limit the individual's freedom of action; this would transform anthropology into a by-product of psychological and mental categories. Opposing the collective to the individual leads us to this kind of cul-de-sac.
5. I am not suggesting what Bourdieu (1989) argues, that the relation between the individual and the collective is based on a dialectical form of social structuring. According to Bourdieu, it is possible to conceptualize structure as the armature of individual action, and thus the constraining field of categories in a social field is a condition of interaction for individuals but does not determine the outcomes of these interactions (Bourdieu 1989: 18). By developing the concept of habitus, Bourdieu seems to have overcome the problem of the individual and the collective. Although he is trying to reconcile both domains, the concept of habitus offers only a virtual conception of individual freedom. He seems to give primacy to the collective structuring force of the habitus as an a priori ordered predisposition.
6. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I refer to Joas's book, the existence of which I was unaware. I agree completely with his argument in favor of creative action as a feasible argument in which to situate the dialectic of the collective and the individual.

7. In my view, the intelligibility of capoeira resides exactly between the realms of conventional and nonconventional models of symbolization. I define a nonconventional or differentiating model of symbolization as the directly creative invocation of a resemblance between the symbol and its reference, while in the social creation of conventional contexts, arbitrariness establishes an ontological distance between the symbol and the symbolized. Although aspects of the conventional mode are important to the development of capoeira, many of the existing social relations seem to depend on nonconventional symbolizations created by *mestres*. This nonconventional form of symbolization has its origin in the evidence of power inscribed in the bodies of the leaders.
8. Part of the material in chapter 3 has been published before in Spanish in González Varela 2012a. Part of the subsection “The Logic of Practice: Learning about the Closed Body” is taken from González Varela 2013.
9. Parts of the material in chapter 4 has been published previously, although it has been edited for the purposes of this book (González Varela 2013).
10. Some of the topics discussed on materiality in chapter 6 were published previously in González Varela 2012.