

Representation of Women in Capoeira Songs

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Translator's Note: All numbered endnotes are the authors.
All footnotes marked with an asterisk (*) are my own comments for clarification.

Abstract. This article analyzes the representation of women in capoeira songs, examining the ethical and instructive roles of the lyrics. Some comparisons are made between common themes in capoeira songs and in Popular Brazilian Music (MPB), establishing links between the representation of women in both musical traditions. This study also evaluates the misogynistic message of many lyrics, contrasting them with the process of transformation that has taken place in capoeira circles. The presence of prominent feminine voices, the questioning of the mistreatment of women, and the new songs are all aspects that have contributed to re-shaping the female image in the songs and in the game.

The songs in capoeira have playful, ethical, and instructive roles. They are used as textbooks in the roda, serving to solidify the rules of the game and transmit the art's history and philosophy. Many of them speak of worldviews, moral values, and codes of conduct; describe a philosophical vision, praise God, or recount legends and popular proverbs. Other songs describe Bahian customs and folklore, present fragments of Brazilian history, refer to the enslavement of the Africans and the police persecution, honor historical figures like Zumbi, or sing about the great mestres of capoeira. Then there are songs that analyze the rules of the game/fight, describe

malícia and *malandragem*, honor the berimbau, or explore the actions and reactions of the partners/adversaries. As symbols of cultural resistance, the songs of capoeira trace the historical paths of the African diaspora in Brazil and indicate socio-cultural changes. The songs also reveal important information about gender relations and the role that women have in capoeira circles.

The three most common types of songs are the *ladainha*, the *chula*, and the *corrido*. The *ladainha* is a long solo, an introductory narrative that is sung in *rodas* of Capoeira Angola and should be sung by a *mestre* or by someone who has his permission, or who is respected in the capoeira universe. The *ladainha* is directed to the players who will enter the *roda*; crouched at the foot of the berimbau, the two players concentrate in order to participate in the game. No physical play occurs during the *ladainha*; instead, it is an opportunity to focus on the message of the lyrics, which invoke important ideas and values for the game. The *chula* follows the *ladainha* and works in a similar manner: the phrases chosen may honor some aspect of the game, thank God, speak of *mestres* and moral values, or describe historical-cultural situations. The *chula* is shorter than the *ladainha* and signals the beginning of the game. The *corridos* are sung by everyone in the *roda* as a response to the movements and games. They are short songs with a more accelerated rhythm. However, the division between the types of songs is not rigid, because sometimes *chulas* and *corridos* are treated as just a single category (Barbosa, “A gramática” 80-81).

The majority of capoeira songs are public domain, having passed from *mestre* to student through various generations. Therefore, it is very difficult to pinpoint the date on which they were composed, or to verify the changes they underwent. As Waldeloir Rego muses: “It is too

dangerous to try to distinguish old capoeira songs from modern ones, and, in a certain way, songs of capoeira itself and songs from other sources that are sung in capoeira” (89).*

It is thus common for the songs to parallel certain stereotypes existent in Brazilian society, becoming a space in which the misogynistic tendencies that dominate capoeira rodas can be confirmed with greater clarity.

The lyrics of the songs often brag about masculine power and disparage women. In this light, there are some thematic similarities between capoeira songs – especially the corridos – and the lyrics of some songs from Popular Brazilian Music (MPB). In “Woman makes and unmakes man,” a study about the relationships between man and woman in the social construction of Brazilian identity, Ruben George Oliven examines compositions of Lupicínio Rodrigues, Noel Rosa and Ataulfo Alves, among other authors. He thematically analyzes the representation of women in this song repertoire and the great repercussion that the songs had in the peoples’ mentality. The author discusses the female presence in the lyrics of these songs and concludes that woman is described as a hub of discord and conflict, as a traitor and unfaithful person. Oliven also examines the representation of public and private space in MPB, focusing his analysis on what he calls “the economy of work and custom,” and on the prototypes of “anchor-women” and “compass-women” or in other words, those who stabilize and guide men. He limits his analysis to the music of the 30s, 40s, and 50s, but his conclusions can be expanded to other sambas, bossa nova songs, samba-reggae and other rhythms, in a time trajectory from the 70s until the present.¹

Similarly to MPB, some capoeira songs frequently codify moral and social values upon describing women as possessions, inferior beings, objects of sexual pleasure, or obstacles to male

* Capoeira contains many songs that were “borrowed” from samba or other musical traditions.

well-being. Men are described as being the ones who define the norms of behavior: generally what women can or cannot wear, if they should or shouldn't cut their hair, use makeup, or live outside the house. The corrido "A Mulher para Ser Bonita" (Woman, to be Beautiful) ² exemplifies this tradition:

A mulher pra ser bonita, Paraná,	In order to be beautiful,
Não precisa se pintar, Paraná.	A woman doesn't have to wear makeup
A pintura é do demônio, Paraná.	Makeup is of the devil
Beleza é Deus quem dá, Paraná.	It is God who gives beauty

This song is similar to "Marina" by Dorival Caymmi, in which the lyrics criticize a woman for having put on makeup. In both songs, makeup is condemned as being something that saddens a man who is in love (in "Marina") and a thing of the "devil" ("A Mulher para Ser Bonita"). It is considered a symbol of sexual seduction and an example of the "vulgar" tricks women use to attract sexual partners – so much so that in both songs, women are encouraged not to wear it. Considering the great feminist conquests of the last few decades, such an attempt to exert this type of social control over women seems absolute. However, it's interesting that the capoeira song continues to be sung in rodas, and "Marina" is considered one of Caymmi's prime works. These facts confirm the hypothesis that some of the moral values transmitted by the lyrics of these songs still survive, despite all the victories of women.

The only images of women in the traditional capoeira songs in which they are NOT disparaged or criticized appear in those songs that reference mythical "mother" or "grandmother" figures, or Our Lady.* In these cases, woman is revered and put on a superior plane, since in popular thought the mother and saint represent models of virtue. Both the mother/grandmother

* The Virgin Mary

figure and the Our Lady figure belong to the model of “anchor-women” and “compass-women” that Oliven describes.

Close to 25% of the 397 songs analyzed for this study refer to women. Among this portion, twelve mention the mother and grandmother as a source of support and emotional security, and five invoke the Virgin Mary, the supreme representation of the maternal figure. One example is “Valha-me Nossa Senhora,” (Help me, Our Lady) a public-domain song in which the lyrics seek the Mother of Jesus as a symbol of divine power and as an anchor and guide. Paradoxically, although the lyrics seek the protection of the Virgin, being a woman is the lowest on the scale of values:

Valha-me, Nossa Senhora,	Help me, Our Lady
Mãe de Deus de Nazaré.	Mother of God of Nazareth
A vaca mansa dá leite.	The tame cow gives milk
A “braba” dá quando quer.	The untamed cow gives only when she wants to
A mansa dá sossegada	The tame cow gives it calmly
A “braba” levanta o pé.	The untamed cow kicks her hooves
Já fui barco, fui navio	I have been a boat, I have been a ship
E hoje sou “iscalé.”	And today I am an “iscalé”*
Já fui linha de meada	I have been a fishing line
Hoje sou de carretel.	Today I’m the spool
Já fui menino, sou homem,	I’ve been a boy, I am a man
Só me falta ser mulher.	Only thing I haven’t been is a woman
Valha-me, Nossa Senhora,	Help me, Our Lady
Mãe de Deus de Nazaré.	Mother of God of Nazareth

(Qtd. in Bola Sete 98)

When comparing the portrayal of women in capoeira songs to the portrayal of men, we see that men are presented in a much more positive light. Man is the knower of the secrets of the game; clever, dangerous, vain, and seductive. He faces any battle, fights his enemies bravely in war (there are various references to the War of Paraguay), and is also clever and intelligent, managing to trick the police and escape bullies. Even when the songs refer to *malandragem* or *vadiagem*, the masculine universe is not described in a pejorative manner. Instead, *malandragem* and *vadiagem* (idleness – a euphemism for playing capoeira) are seen as metaphors of the game itself, acquiring the positive sense of wisdom and flexibility. The negative connotations of these words in other contexts – being used to indicate laziness or social parasitism – are thus discarded. We see the celebration of *vadiagem* in “Foi Agora Que Cheguei”:³

Foi agora que cheguei,	I have just arrived
já mandaram eu vadiar.	They've sent me to play
O meu mestre me ensinou,	My mestre taught me
meu dever é ir lutar.	My duty is to go fight

Letícia Vidor de Sousa Reis directed my attention to the fact that, in some songs, women are considered gossips and men by contrast are seen as more reserved people.⁴ In this way, men are given yet another positive quality – avoiding gossip and not involving themselves in “idle chatter.” The following public-domain song, sung in the form of a dialogue between two women, illustrates this:

– Minha comadre, até você?	My friend, even you?
Falou de mim, minha comadre.	Talked about me, my friend
– Eu não falei, minha comadre.	I didn't talk, my friend
– Falou que eu vi, minha comadre.	Yes you did, I saw you, my friend

* Another type of boat

– Eu não vou na sua casa, minha comadre,	I won't go to your house, my friend
Pra você não ir na minha, minha comadre.	So that you won't come to mine
– Você tem a boca grande, minha comadre,	You have a big mouth, my friend
Vai comer minha farinha, minha comadre.	You're going to eat my flour, my friend

(Qtd. in Bola Sete 149)

Capoeira songs contain many figures of speech and a variety of meanings. There are many phrases that function as small linguistic puzzles, and inversion of meaning, metaphor, and symbolic language are also common.⁵ For example, in “Minha Comadre, Até Você” (Even You, My Friend) there is a double meaning that could be understood as not only referring to women, but also to the analysis of the game itself. The reaction against the other player’s “gluttony” leads the daring or “gluttonous” player to fall into the cleverness of the game, or in other words “comer da farinha” (“eat the flour”). In the same way as the “big mouth” can refer to talking too much (gossip or chattiness), it can also refer to the player trying to do things that are too daring (trying to “eat” more than they should). And also, in Brazilian popular thought, calling a man a woman is a form of belittling him or provoking him to fight. In this scenario, the “friend” is the emasculated, effeminate, or weak man; therefore, he is considered an inferior being who deserves being beaten up in the game. In summary, we can see that both meanings – the woman as a gossip, and the use of the feminine vocabulary to belittle a male player – show that the traditional capoeira songs tend to reflect the misogynist attitudes common in Brazilian society.

In many cases, woman is still seen as a small accessory to man. This attitude of male superiority and women as second-class citizens is illustrated in comparing the pandeiro (a musically important instrument) and clapping hands (an extraneous thing in Capoeira Regional and mixed styles). Consider the following traditional song, frequently sung in capoeira rodas:

Minha mãe ‘tá me chamando,	My mother is calling me
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Oh! que vida de mulher!	Oh! What a woman's life!
Quem toca pandeiro é homem,	Men are the ones who play pandeiro
Quem bate palmas é mulher.	Women are the ones who clap their hands

Various songs criticize women, classifying them as jealous, unfaithful, traitorous, and wicked. In the following corrido there are many complaints against women, belittling them as being the cause of men's folly:

Minha mãe sempre dizia	My mother always told me
Que a mulher matava homem.	That woman killed man
Agora acabei de crer:	Now I have come to the conclusion
Quando não mata, consome.	When she doesn't kill him, she consumes him

(Public domain, qtd. in Bola Sete 101)

Songs tend to condemn female jealousy, but never explore the causes that lead women to doubt men. They do not comment, for example, on male infidelity, nor do they analyze the attitudes of jealous men or the use of physical force against women. The traditional songs present a single-sided vision of jealousy: through the eyes of men and in a masculine voice. The corrido "Casa de Palha é Palhoça" (A house made of straw is a straw hut) is a typical example of a song that sees jealousy as an illness and expresses repulsion of a jealous woman, considering her a vile being:

Casa de palha é palhoça,	A house made of straw is a straw hut
se eu fosse fogo queimava.	If I was fire, I would burn it
Toda mulher ciumenta,	Every jealous woman,
se eu fosse a morte matava.	If I was death, I would kill them

(Public domain, qtd. in Bola Sete 112)

In the song “O Calado é Vencedor,” (The Silent One Wins) also a common lyric, woman is described as an evil, traitorous, venomous person, without scruples and without compassion.

She is thus compared to a snake:

O calado é vencedor	The silent one wins
Para quem juízo tem,	For whoever has good sense
Quem espera ser vingado	Whoever waits to be avenged
não roga praga em ninguém.	Never curses anyone
A mulher é como a cobra,	Woman is like a snake
tem sangue de “peçanha,”	With venomous blood
deixa o rico na miséria,	She leaves the rich man miserable
deixa o pobre sem vergonha.	She leaves the poor man without dignity
(Qtd. in Bola Sete 117)	

There are also songs that refer to male capoeiristas as snakes, but when this happens, it is not done to belittle the player. For example, the corrido “A Cobra Me Morde” (The Snake Bites Me) is a representation of the male capoeirista’s agility, precision, and strategies of attack and defense. At the same time in which the snake is described as “damned,” “venomous,” and capable of destruction (“the snake bites me”), there is also praise of its qualities, because it is “brave” and fearless. The ambiguity of the word “snake” – which, in popular use, can mean either a nasty person or an expert – is present in this song. The lyrics compare the player and his venom to a snake, exemplifying *malícia*, analyzing the playful seduction of the movements and warning about the inherent danger in each game:

Esta cobra te morde,	This snake bites you
Ô, sinhô São Bento! (Coro)	Oh Lord Saint Benedict! (Chorus)
Ôi, o bote da cobra,	The strike of the snake
Ôi, a cobra mordeu,	The snake bit

O veneno da cobra,	The venom of the snake
Ôi, a casca da cobra,	The skin of the snake
Ô que cobra danada,	Oh, what a damned snake
Ô que cobra malvada,	Oh, what an evil snake
Buraco velho	Old holes
Ô que cobra danada.	Oh, what a damned snake
Tem cobra dentro	Have snakes inside
Ôi, o pulo da cobra.	The leap of the snake
Ê compadre.	Comrade
(Qtd. in Rego 94-95)	

In this song, the capoeira player emulates the flexibility and the precision of the serpent (which is seen as something positive) and reflects the duplicity of the snake whose venom can kill, but is also used as a medicine. In comparative terms, this ambiguity is not present in “O Calado é Vencedor” because it only describes the destructive aspects of the snake-woman, explaining them as biological facts, inherent to her gender (“she has venomous blood”), as a stingy person (“leaves the rich man in misery”), and without morals or ethics, as she dishonors man and shames him (“leaves the poor man without dignity”).

In many of the songs, violence against women is in a psychological aspect and is disguised by emotional appeals. But there are also songs in which the violence is not hidden, and which teach cruel acts against the female population, describe controlling and disciplinary attitudes of men, and tear down women in a vicious way. In these songs, women do not even have a voice; they are at the mercy of the lyrics’ punishments. Men are also frequently described as emotionally numb or as victims of women’s deception.

The assumption is made that this masculine suffering justifies the physical and psychological violence against women, or the aggressive behavior towards her friends. For example, consider three very popular songs in capoeira rodas, which describe “punishments” as a form of discipline and serve as a certification of men’s well-being.⁵ In the first song, jealous women are cursed, because her jealousy is an evil that can afflict or irritate a man even more than a leak in the ceiling, a kid who cries non-stop, or an incorrigible horse. The central message is that capoeiristas should avoid relationships with jealous women because there is no remedy for this type of “disease”:

São quatro coisas no mundo	There are four things in the world
que ao homem consome:	That consume a man
uma casa pingando,	A leaky ceiling
um cavalo “chotão,”	An incorrigible horse
uma mulher ciumenta,	A jealous woman
um menino chorão.	A crying kid
Tudo isso ele dá jeito:	But he fixes them all:
a casa ele retelha,	He re-tiles the ceiling
o cavalo “negoceia,”	He tames the horse
o menino acalenta,	He quiets the kid
a mulher ciumenta cai na peia.	And the jealous woman falls down the well
(Qtd. in Mestre Reinaldo s.p.)	

The second song teaches an efficient way to control an insubordinate woman: by rationing her food (as though one was training an animal):

Se essa mulher fosse minha,	If that woman was mine,
Eu ensinava a viver.	I would teach her how to live
Dava feijão com farinha	I would give her beans and flour

A semana todinha

The whole week

Pra ela comer.⁶

For her to eat.

The third song goes even further and clearly suggests the use of a beating and/or the necessity of discarding a woman as though she were an undesirable object:

Xique-Xique, moçambira

Xique-xique, moçambira

Mandacaru, palmatória.

Mandacaru, palmatória*

A mulher quando não presta,

When a woman is useless

O homem manda embora.

Man sends her away

(Qtd. in Bola Sete 92)

**Xique-xique and mandacaru are both types of cactuses. Palmatória is both a type of cactus and also a “wooden spoon” used to smack misbehaving students. I’m not sure what moçambira is, but you get the idea!*

There are also songs in which the portrayal of woman is a bit more sophisticated, as it leaves room for other interpretations. Although it parallels some stereotypes common in literature and in popular imagination, the song “Saia do Mar, Marinheiro” (Leave the Sea, Sailor) deals with the “feminine principle” and the metaphor of seduction. The lyrics exemplify the *malícia* and ambiguity that are integral parts of the capoeira game, but they also refer to woman, since it is believed that she embodies the duplicity of the role of the seductress. She is the mermaid whose enticing energy attracts her partner/adversary to the game, and the sailor who also feels attracted by the magnetism of the game:

Saia do mar, marinheiro! (Coro)

Leave the sea, sailor! (Chorus)

Vou m’bora pro estrangeiro.

I’m going away to foreign lands

Amanhã vou embarcar, marinheiro.

Tomorrow I will embark, sailor

Se você quiser me ver

If you want to see me

Jogue seu navio no mar, marinheiro.

Put your boat in the sea, sailor

Marinheiro, quando em vela	When the sailor is sailing
As sereias cantam no mar, marinheiro.	The mermaids sing in the sea, sailor
Saia do mar, marinheiro,	Leave the sea, sailor
Saia do mar, estrangeiro.	Leave the sea, foreigner
(Qtd. in Bola Sete 130)	

Considering capoeira's long tradition in Brazil, its various phases, styles, and recent globalization, it is not surprising that positive changes have begun to take shape both in the representation of women in songs and in the attitudes of capoeiristas. Despite all the prejudice against women in capoeira, the more enlightened men have always rejected the songs that denigrate the female image. It is also good to remember that the chauvinistic attitude of various capoeira players, reflected in the lyrics of the songs, goes against the philosophical principles of the game/fight/ritual. The following saying, attributed to Mestre Pastinha, confirms these principles: "Capoeira is for men, women, and children / The only people who don't learn are those who don't want to." (Cited by Pequeno and Machado 8). The following traditional song, frequently sung in capoeira rodas, carries the same idea:

Sai, sai, Catarina, (Coro)	Leave, leave, Catarina (Chorus)
Venha pro mar.	Come to the sea
Venha ver Idalina,	Come see Idalina
Venha ver, Catarina.	Come see, Catarina
(Qtd. in Bola Sete 133)	

If the songs of capoeira focus the energy in the roda, transforming the movements and representing the *malícia* of the game through the playful and evasive meanings of their words, they cannot help but indicate the changes that women have brought to capoeira rodas. Nowadays, it is no longer rare for female capoeiristas to question the traditional lyrics in which masculinity

is affirmed through denigrating women. For example, many women refuse to sing certain songs, changing the lyrics of the more misogynistic ones, and even writing their own songs. One example is the corrido “Dendê de Aro Amarelo,” (Dendê oil from a yellow plant) in which the original version emphasizes the value of men and belittles women:

Oi dendê, oi dendê,	Oh dendê, oh dendê
Dendê de aro amarelo	Dendê from a yellow plant
Eu vou dizer a dendê:	I will say to dendê
“Sou homem, não sou mulher.”	“I am a man, not a woman”

(Qtd. in Bola Sete 144)

Today, it is common for the lyrics of this corrido to be inverted by women in order to switch the order of the values (“Eu sou mulher / Não sou homem” – I am a woman, not a man), thus establishing women’s presence in the roda.* This type of inversion in the song lyrics also helps women to gain their space in the game. By changing the order of the words, they remind their male comrades that capoeira philosophy preaches equality and respect. The change in the order of the words is not a simple reversal of two terms, but rather raising awareness that women today make up almost 40% of those who play or study capoeira.⁷ Thus, it serves to promote the idea that capoeira rodas are a space of social mediation, where there should be no discrimination based on sex, age, or race.

Although women have entered the capoeira roda, there is a cultural and temporal gap that hinders their quantitative and qualitative performance. Whereas men benefit from capoeira’s long masculine tradition and mestres who serve as role models for generations of boys and young men, only in the last twenty years have women begun to systematically gain this type of visibility and support. If the social barrier that kept capoeira an exclusively male game has

* I have more frequently heard it sung “Tem homem e tem mulher” – “[Capoeira] has both men and women”

already been dismantled at least in part, there are still other factors – such as this temporal and cultural gap, violence, greater physical strength, and patterns of chauvinistic behavior – that create obstacles for women in terms of reaching the higher levels of capoeira in significant numbers. Some women feel discouraged from continuing because they believe they are competing in unfair conditions. In addition, traditional capoeira promotes chauvinist behaviors. However, the number of female capoeiristas is growing and the recognition of their participation in the game is also gaining visibility.⁸

These positive changes are recorded in the newest songs that were written by women. This new aspect – lyrics that focus on the female capoeirista – contrasts the traditional songs that celebrate masculine strength and domination. One example is the *ladainha* “Força Guerreira” (Female Warrior Strength), by Ively Mayumi Nagaye Viccari, which emphasizes qualities generally associated with women. The definition of female strength in this song is based in stereotypes of the feminine universe (intuition, cycles, seduction, and elegance), and this song is unique because it presents woman as having an active role, linking her to the capacity for creativity, wisdom, and the *malícia* necessary to the capoeira game.

Like many traditional capoeira songs, “Força Guerreira” has a metaphorical function, as it analyzes the history of capoeira (references to slavery and to cultural resistance), touches on the etymology of the word capoeira (“cut underbrush”) and the origin of the game itself and its philosophy (“intuition” and “internal energy”). But it also aims to awaken the female capoeirista to her rights and her strength:

Força guerreira, que não só	Warrior strength, which is not just
pelo físico, mas pela intuição	Physical, but also through intuition
e energia interna.	And internal energy
Aflorada quando necessário	It blooms when necessary

para defender o alimento	To defend the sustenance
de seu filho, de sua linhagem,	Of her child, of her lineage,
de seu povo, de toda sua espécie.	Of her people, of her entire species.
O princípio que vem da terra,	Originating from the earth,
de suas entranhas,	From its insides,
e mistura-se ao “mato-ralo”	And mixes with the “cut underbrush”
não para submeter-se,	Not to submit herself,
mas demonstrando toda	But demonstrating all
a sua sabedoria.	Her knowledge
Capaz de envolver o mais “cruel,”	Capable of entrapping the “crueler”
porém, menos “sabido” senhor,	But less “clever” lord
com seu jeito faceiro,	With her cheerful manner
que se espalhou pelo universo.	That spread through the universe.
Fazendo a conexão como um todo	Making the connection as a whole
Abrindo e fechando ciclos	Opening and closing cycles
Como o princípio da existência (a respiração).	With the origin of existence (breath)
Muito bem centrada em seu útero,	Very well-centered in her womb,
porém, com grande generosidade	But, with great generosity
capaz de doar-se	Capable of giving
não só a seus filhos,	Not just to her children,
mas aos de outros também.	But to others instead.
Bela e vaidosa	Beautiful and vain
como uma obra de arte, de vida,	Like a work of art, of life,
de resistência e sobrevivência	Of endurance and survival

mas, principalmente de prazer... de “fruição.” But mainly of pleasure... of “fruition”*

The quantitative and qualitative presence of women in capoeira has begun to change the dynamics in the roda. The traditional songs are being re-examined and new *ladainhas*, *chulas*, and *corridos* are being written to replace those in which women are denigrated. The appearance of female voices in capoeira does not imply an attempt to polarize the masculine and feminine sides or create tension between men and women. Rather, it aims to establish female role models who can contribute to the growth of female capoeiristas, solidify an atmosphere of more respect and friendship in the art, question the ideology that belittles women, and unmask the misogynistic message of the traditional songs.

There is no longer any doubt that women have substantially contributed towards the establishment of greater equilibrium between masculine and feminine energy in the roda. This energy is also represented in the dialog between the high and low notes of the berimbau, which are sometimes seen as an interaction between the masculine and feminine elements of capoeira. When seen in this light, the two tones of the berimbau come to symbolize the philosophy of an art that does not discriminate based on gender, race, or age. They also indicate a mediation between the genders, because berimbau toques traditionally function as moderators of the game in the roda. Therefore, the song lyrics that belittle women in capoeira rodas and in Brazilian society are out of tune with the chords of the berimbau and do not fit with the principles established in the tradition of the great mestres like Pastinha and Bimba, who preached equality of genders, races, and ages.

* This is a rather obscure song. I’ve never heard it sung, nor can I even find the lyrics elsewhere on the web besides in this paper. I personally think there are better examples of songs that honor women, but the author wanted to showcase this one.

Through the movements of her body and through her songs, the female capoeirista has wisely traced new lines in the cultural context of capoeira, establishing a process of mediation and re-codifying the interaction and the seduction of the game. Considering the social changes that have occurred since the 1970s and all the factors that influenced the female presence in capoeira, it can be concluded that the modern woman is mapping out a real space in capoeira circles, and that positive changes in the songs will continue to occur. Upon negotiating a socio-cultural space in rodas, groups, and academies, women have re-shaped the game of capoeira. In this environment, the traditional songs dishonoring women become more and more dissonant, since they do not reflect the balance between the genders that has already been established in more enlightened circles.

As a form of survival, female capoeiristas have adopted a cultural syncretism in which they are both brave sailors and seductive mermaids at the same time. Using the figurative language of Luiz da Câmara Cascudo, it is possible to conclude that, if female capoeiristas possess neither the “irresistible song” of their “Mediterranean sisters” nor the immense passion of the “Water Goddesses of Brazil,” then they are heirs of the African mermaids and they re-take “the sovereignty of their distant enchanted kingdoms” (23). Utilizing the logic of the syncretic language, female capoeiristas have incorporated special strategies and wisdom in their games. They emerge in the rodas and academies as new *iaras*^{*} or as heirs of Quianda, Quituba, and Quiximbi, Angolan mermaids that represent endurance, cunning, and courage.^{**} Female capoeiristas are learning to use the seduction of the game itself in order to establish a space for respect and consideration in the roda. Today, woman is inside the ambiguity of the fight/ritual of

* An *iara* is a mythical woman, a mermaid of the rivers and lakes according to the mythology of Brazil’s indigenous peoples.

** Unfortunately I can’t find any further information on these three Angolan mermaids.

capoeira, as both the seductress who sings in order to attract her partner/adversary, and as the fearless and courageous adventurer who embarks on the journey with *malícia*, *ginga*, and wisdom.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, the following songs: “Minha Namorada” (My Girlfriend) by Carlinhos Lyra, “Cotidiano” (Daily Life) by Chico Buarque, “Tropicana” and “Dois Animais” (Two Animals) by Alceu Valença, as well as “Você Não Passa de uma Mulher” (You Don’t Pass as a Woman) by Martinho da Vila.

² Not all public-domain capoeira songs have been recorded. When I could not find sources in the literature, I used recordings of songs that I myself recorded during my visits to capoeira rodas and academies in Salvador (in June of 2000 and 2002), in São Paulo (July of 2002), and in Rio de Janeiro (May and October of 2003).

³ I transcribed this public-domain song, which I heard in various capoeira rodas.

⁴ Conversation that we had in São Paulo, on July 11, 2002.

⁵ These songs are still often sung in capoeira rodas and continue to be taught by mestres and contra-mestres both inside and outside Brazil. For example, “Quatro coisas neste mundo” is included in a ladainha written by Mestre Reinaldo from the group “Um Passo a Mais.” See the magazine *Revista dos Mestres de Capoeira* 22 (2003): s.p.

⁶ I transcribed this public-domain song, which I heard in various capoeira rodas.

⁷ See the comments by Rosângela Costa Araújo in “Contra Mestre.”

⁸ See, for example, the international conferences organized by the International Capoeira Angola Federation, the “Homenagem Nzinga para a Mulher Brasileira” (Nzinga Homage to the Brazilian Woman), the “Afro-Brazilian Cultural Marathon” and other events organized by the capoeira group ABADA.

⁹ For an analysis of the path of women in capoeira and the socio-cultural factors responsible for their exclusion/inclusion in the capoeira universe, see Barbosa’s “A Trajetória” (The Trajectory).

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