116 - THE RELATION OF THE SACRED IN CAPOEIRA GAME

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Capoeira, also understood as process of Afro-Brazilian culture, tells its story and its followers' stories and has religiosity *as one of the constituting pillars of its social imaginary. Instruments such as berimbau* and *atabaque*, besides marking the rhythm of the game, lend their sacred attributes and are worshipped in the circle, music and chant are symbolic elements telling stories and legends of Gods, *Orixás* and enchanted entities who, along with the dominant Catholicism, comprise the syncretism which founded a peculiar religiosity to cultural manifestations from Africans and their descendents in Brazil.

Teves (1992) points out that investigating a social reality is telling, with a coordinate set of representations, a structure of senses, of meanings which circulate among its members through different forms of languages: this set is the social imaginary which can be expressed in various human productions, giving us clues of the social relations established within the groups. Therefore, when unveiling some aspects of the sacredness in *capoeira* game, we do hope to contribute to the understanding of the symbolic plots which comprise this element's imaginary of body culture, highly marked by religious aspects.

Pierre Ansart (1978), anthropologist and scholar of social imaginaries, claims that religion replaces myth in the explanations about the world and its order justifying the reasons of being of social existence. “Religion points to the desirable, orders the individual actions for the achievement of fair desires, praises the supreme forms of personal achievement” (p.31). While myth extends the omnipresence of its practices and meanings over all the group, religion ranks these very practices, granting the chosen ones the power to conserve the common meanings and to inculcate to the others through the dogmas which represent the unquestionable truths inside religious discourse. Let us see how *capoeira* reflects in its practices sacred and ritualistic aspects which comprise its practitioners' religiosity.

Capoeira and its religiosity

...Olha o jogo, a mandinga e oração capoeira é religião (...)

It is widely known that *capoeira* has survived keeping in its composition characteristic aspects of the Brazilian religious syncretism, composed of Indian, African and Portuguese values. Some punch names as '*benção'* and '*cruz'* were borrowed from Catholicism while others were extracted from *umbanda*, similar to '*Xangô'* and '*encruzilhada'*; there are beats made by *berimbau* which are named after catholic saints, such as '*Santo Bento grande'*, '*São Bento pequeno'* and '*Santa Maria'* and chants which praise the *orixás*, saints and other illuminated entities, revealing aspects of the sacredness inherent to this game.

For many masters, *capoeira* is seen as religion, bridging through the ritual of the circle, the *orun*, which in *nagô* culture represents the mythical space wherein the Gods live and very much alike other peoples' paradise, and the *aiê*, world of the mortal, like earth for the westerns (Ogebeara, 1998). We understand this link between the sacredness and the profane in the light of Eliade (1996) when he says that human existence is only possible thanks to the permanent communication with heaven. In *capoeiras'* narratives we can find this imaginary: “*capoeira* is a form of entering communion with God. When we are fighting it is like there is nothing else around us but the universe. There is a great integration between us and the cosmic conscience” (Mestre Touro, 1989).

In the analysis of this imaginary which comprises *capoeira*, time arises as a singular experience insofar as it also points to a dimension of the sacred, contrary to chronological time stated by western society. In his notion of sacred time, we refer to Eliade (1996) as the one who leads to a reversible and recoverable circularity, a kind of eternal mythical present which man reintroduces periodically by the language of the rites. It is common, in *capoeira* circles, to prevail the *axé* time, which, for the *nagô* culture means the invisible strength, the magic-sacred strength of all divinity, of all animated being, of everything. (Rego, 1968). For the *capoeira* practitioners, this *axé* arises as the sense of the positive energy which animates and contaminates the *capoeira* game (Squisito *apud* Lima 2005).

According to Reis (2000), the access to the sacred time demands a price: be baptized in *capoeira* and enter the circle, “the capoeira practitioners pay symbolically, that is, they buy the game…” (p.171). The circle can have its time enlarged or reduced due to the presence or lack of this *axé.* Some masters consider this sensibility of energy perception as one of the main rationales of *capoeira*, born by only a few. It is said that the energy causes visible signs to the masters as when the circle is good, with good games, happy chant, good rhythm and *mandinga*., it has *axé*; otherwise, the circle becomes heavy and its reflexes can be notorious for the most demanding

Mestre Mendonça believes that the *capoeira* circle has its own energy. The circle, according to him, is composed of people who, in one circle, form an energetic field commanded by the *berimbau* and that, besides acting in the rhythmic part of the game, denotes sacred attributes to the *capoeira* circle. The *berimbau* is an African instrument which, in is homeland, is known as *urucungo* and has for the black slaves the power of communication with the spirit of the dead and ancestors, besides healing the *banzo.* Silva (2003) sees the *berimbau* as sacred and worshiped by everyone, of the regional or *angola* modalities and that, taken to the religion scope, it protects and “listens to” all *capoeira* practitioners who believes in it.

Maybe is why it is common to hear in the context of *capoeira* sentences such as: “if you turn your back to *capoeira*, it will surely turn against you”, or else, “it's the *capoeira* that chooses you and not you that chooses it” (King, 2006, p.9). It is worth noticing that this sense of choice is also found in *candomblé*. José Beniste (2003) explains that, by choosing a physical space for the implementation of a *terreiro*, “it is not its leader who chooses the space to install its premises, but rather the space which chooses her through its *òrìsá*” (p.46).

Capoeira groups are very often named after catholic saints or *orixás* from *umbanda* and *candomblé* such as: *Irmãos Unidos de São Jorge*, *Capoarte de Obaluaê*, *São Bento pequeno*, *Inaiê* de *Iaoca* among others which comprise the universe of *capoeira*. In some groups, we can find rituals, storiess and codes typical of Afro-Brazilian religious cults. Brito (2004) argues that there is no point denying the link between *capoeira* and religion as the chants provide for this link, talking about catholic saints and *orixás* from the *nagô* culture.

Coelho (2000) agrees and claims that:

What is outstanding in the case of the African religions is the process, which is similar to the *capoeira* rhythm: most of the stories, chants in honor of the *orixás* sung in *terreiros*, can be also sung in the *capeira* circles. But it is not only in this aspect that there is proximity between the religion and *capoeira*: the social environment is the same and so are their practitioners.

However, more important than the similarity of the environment and the agent, it is the initial process present in both, process which turns them co-authors of a sole drama (p. 80).

The Afro-Brazilian musicality portrays in its imaginary its myths of creation, its legends, its beliefs and its religiosity. As to *capoeira*, some stories are either literally sung or adapted to be used in the circles. They often narrate facts occurred according to the mythological Afro-Brazilian universe, its journey is re-visited and each story is praised to their *orixás*, its legends, their beliefs and their myths seem to gain life each time they are evoked in their rites. "(…) *Beira mar auê Beira mar, Beira mar auê Beira mar, é sentinela de oxum é remador de Iemanjá o nosso pai é Ogum é general Beira mar* (...)" (Anonymous).

Still in the perspective of the religiosity present in the *capoeira* circles, Silva (2003) considers the possibility of its being regarded a religion for its followers as, according to the author, "(…) we could think that *capoeira* is exclusively linked to a cult of its own thus becoming a religion or sect exclusive to the *capoeira* practitioners" (p. 93). There are chants which support this argument, as we can see here:

My master told me one day, hey boy, pay attention, I'll teach you capo*eira*, have much devotion, *capoeira* is an art which one learns with the heart, it takes time to play *capoeira*, and this time will take long, keep on growing up well trained so as your body can improve, my life is *capoeira*, but I am *capoeira*. Look at the swing, *mandinga* and pray, capoeira is religion (Anonymous).

It seems that in the chant, one of the senses attributed to *capoeira* is priesthood, with sacred initiation rites, time of grief, body and spiritual preparation and above all religion. The masters seem to give sense to its practice, honoring their saints, *orixás* and *capoeira* itself, playing the role of real priests of this art which, as to the chant, "one learns with the heart". For the *capoeira* practitioner, his life seems to mix with his own *capoeira*, this passage appears regularly in many other chants, reinforcing the representation in the practitioners' imaginary, or rather, the option for this modality as a philosophy of life.

Nestor Capoeira (1997) grants *capoeira* a "magical strength" capable of linking practitioners of the present and of the past by means of an energetic temporal chain which seems to open during the rite of circle, updating heroic deeds of past master and characters in a kind of ritual temporality. The author also argues:

We could even imagine *capoeira* as an entity which protects and opens a path to those who place themselves under its shadow- or else, its light! *Capoeria*- in the imagination of many practitioners- would be a feminine entity similar to a *pomba-gira* of *candomblé* and *umbanda* (p.127).

The entity mentioned by the author as *pomba-gira* belongs to the Afro-Brazilian mythological pantheon categorized as the feminine principle of 'street people or *Exu'*. In the imaginary, it is not rare to find relations of *capoeira* and capoeira practitioners with the mythical figure of *Exu.* Decânio (*apud* Araújo, 1999) describes similarities between the swing of *capoeira* and that of *Exu orixá's* dances in *candomblé*. There is also a kind of *Exu* in the Afro-Brazilian religious universe that embodies the mythical figure of the *malandro*: Zé Pelintra ou just Zé, as it is known by *umbanda* followers. His representation is an always very well-dressed mulato in his white linen suit, double-colored shoes, red carnation in the lapel, Panama hat and red silk scarf around the neck to protect razor attacks. Ligiéro (2004) states that:

Zé Pelintra has also become *capoeira* patron because many of the *Exus* from his group would have belonged to the malandro circles of old Lapa, in Rio de Janeiro: *Zé malandro, Terno branco, Camisa preta, Carioquinha, Zé Pretinho, Gargalhada* and *Zé das Mulheres* make up the mythological "kingdom of *malandro*" (p.64).

For *umbanda* followers, during the ritual the entities manifest themselves through the embodiment of sacred spirits in its respective *mediuns*, as are called the sectarian religious people, and present themselves according to their mythical characteristics. The *Exus* cited by Ligiéro (2004) make up a *falange* guided by Zé Pelintra who, according to the Afro-Brazilian mythology, lived in old Lapa in the state of Rio de Janeiro, and belonged to a group of *malandros* that, for the author:

For anyone to belong to this select group of high class *malandro*, one had to be good at fighting. Enter the *capoeira* circle ou 'batuqueiros' to prove one understood about malice and escape, was a compulsory baptism. Only then, the *malandro* got a degree to be recognized as *master*, a real *bama* (p.65).

Zé Pelintra can be regarded the archetype of this "Brazilian *malandro*", good at *capoeira*, beloved pimp by several women, being supported by many of them, bohemian and a good dancer, never without his razor and his *patuá*, indispensable elements to cheat the establishment ordered by the dominant. During the *umbanda* religious ritual, the figure of Zé Pelintra manifest itself in the *terreiro* with movements and gestures which lead us to the *capoeira* practice reinforcing the imaginary of a sacred entity that practices and protects *capoeira*.

It is interesting to point out that this Afro-Brazilian religious perspective is not the only one within the universe of *capoeira* as there are *capoeira* groups whose masters are catholic and from other religions. From the nineties on arises a group known as 'evangelic *capoeira*, which in contrast with the Afro-Brazilian religious roots, suggests a series of changes which will act on the symbolism of *capoeira* ritual.

Some of these changes include: the withdrawal of *atabaque* which, for some evangelic masters, has strong links with *umbanda* and *candomble*; the beats of *berimbau* with the name of catholic saints are few or almost never used by some of these masters because, according to their religious beliefs, catholic saints do not hold sacred representation and there is only one God possible for all, different from the phrase "/…/ *viva meu Deus carnará*" sung in *capoeira* circles. For some masters, the phrase can lead to the existence of more than one God, which is contrary to their doctrine.

Another emblematic difference happens in the baptism, a rite created by Mestre Bimba which initiates the *capoeria* practitioner in the 'world of *capoeira'*. Traditionally, applicant students play with masters, counter-masters or graduate students and receive, at the end of the game, his 'nickname' which will follow him throughout his journey in the modality. For some evangelic *capoeira* masters, the term 'baptized' leads to a sacred ritual and using this name could profane some of the group's precept and the nicknames, both of them would be unworthy of *capoeira* practitioners.

The *capoeira* teacher known as Moreno points out that "the initiation of the evangelic *capoeira* practitioner, for example, is called by some in the *début*, in the place of baptism, a word incorporated of the catholic liturgy". (Moreno *apud* Lima, 2005, p.35). Mano Lima also brings us the idea of using *capoeira* as an instrument able to evangelize through classes and rites adapted for this purpose such as: songs made to praise God and even the creation of the "*capoeira* practitioners church which gathers people from various congregations" (Lima 2005) in Goiânia.

We can perceive that the religiosity is intimately linked to *capoeira* practice and *capoeira* practitioners, being expressed in chants and in the existing symbolism in its rites. Therefore, religion, through its symbolic traces not only permeates the *capoeira* practitioners' universe and through its codes reinforces but even constitutes an efficient symbolic language in the ideological viewpoint, strengthening the bonds of belonging and the social imaginary within the group.

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THE RELATION OF THE SACRED IN CAPOEIRA GAME

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to discuss aspects of the sacredness in *capoeira* game so as to contribute to the understanding of some symbolic plots which constitute this element of the body culture of movement. *Capoeira* relies on religiosity as one of the pillars of its social imaginary. *Berimbau* and *atabaque* lend their sacred attributes and are worshiped in the circle, its chants tell stories and legends of Gods and *Orixás* which, along with Catholicism, comprise the syncretism of a religiosity peculiar to the Africans' cultural manifestations and its descendants in Brazil.

KEY WORDS: *capoeira*, sacredness, social imaginary

LES RELATIONS DU SACRÉE DANS LE JEU DE LA CAPOEIRA

RESUMÉ

Objective qui nous oriente dans ces études, d'écriture bibliographique, qui est de decouvrir l'aspects des sacrés present au jeu de la capoeira, en espérant contribuer à une compréhension des symboles que constituent cet élément de la culture corporel du mouvement. La capoeira possède dans la religion un pilier pour l'imaginarie social. Le berimbau et l'atabaque pretend leurs attributs sacrés qui sont representé dans le cercle, leurs chants narrent les légendes des Dieus et Orixas qui lié au catholicisme, composent d'un mélange dúne religiosité particulière aux manifestations culturel africaine et les descendent du Bresil.

MOTS-CLES : capoeira, religiosité, imaginaire social.

LAS RELACIONES DE LO SAGRADO EN EL JUEGO DE CAPOEIRA

RESUMEN

La capoeira tiene la religiosidad como uno de sus ejes en el imaginario social. El berimbau y el atabaque les prestan sus atributos sagrados y son reverenciados en la rueda. Sus cánticos narran causos y leyendas de Dioses, Orixas y encantamientos que, junto al catolicismo, componen el sincretismo de una religiosidad peculiar a las manifestaciones culturales de los africanos y sus descendientes en Brasil. De esta manera, el objetivo que nos orienta en este estúdio, de carácter bibliográfico, es poner de manifiesto los aspectos de lo sagrado presentes en el juego de capoeira. Esperamos contribuir para la comprensión de algunas tramas simbólicas que constituyen ese elemento de la cultura corporal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: capoeira, sagrado, imaginario social.

AS RELAÇÕES DO SAGRADO NO JOGO DE CAPOEIRA.

RESUMO

O objetivo que nos orienta neste estudo, de cunho bibliográfico, é desvelar aspectos do sagrado presentes no jogo da capoeira, esperando contribuir para o entendimento de algumas tramas simbólicas que constituem esse elemento da cultura corporal de movimento. A capoeira possui na religiosidade um dos pilares de seu imaginário social. O berimbau e o atabaque emprestam seus atributos sagrados e são reverenciados na roda, seus cânticos narram causos e lendas de Deuses e Orixás, que, junto ao catolicismo, compõem o sincretismo de uma religiosidade peculiar às manifestações culturais dos africanos e seus descendentes no Brasil.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: capoeira, sagrado, imaginário social.