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TRICK OR TREAT? HALLOWEEN RODAS IN THE UNITED STATES

ABSTRACT

There is a surprising dearth of literature on cultural appropriation within the context of capoeira, a now-global art form that is deeply rooted in the particular social and political history of colonial Brazil. This article provides a fine-grained analysis of a debate over cultural appropriation that took place on Facebook between a contra-mestre based in the United States and several members of the capoeira community. While the contra-mestre essentially argues that it is inappropriate to use capoeira in service of a Euro-American, capitalist holiday, other members of the community argue that playing capoeira in Halloween costumes is harmless fun that may in fact entice others to join the community where they can be enculturated into the value system of capoeira. Ultimately, this article argues for a more nuanced understanding of cultural appropriation that attends to the specific rhetorical moves made within naturally occurring discourse.

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KEYWORDS

Capoeira, Halloween, holidays, cultural appropriation, globalization

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"Masquerades disclose the reality of souls." – Fernando Pessoa

INTRODUCTION

The practice of capoeira is no longer confined to the docks, plazas, beaches, and alleyways of Brazil (see also Assunção, 2005 and Joseph, 2012). It has become a truly global phenomenon and with that comes questions of authority, 'authenticity,' and adulteration (see de Campos Rosario, Stephens, and Delamont, 2010). It is within this context that I discuss the practice of Halloween rodas – capoeira events held in conjunction with this annual holiday, which are often done in costume. While it might be an exaggeration to say that this practice has become commonplace, I have found evidence of such events occurring throughout the U.S. as well as in Canada and Europe. What interests me is not so much the use of capoeira to celebrate non-Brazilian holidays, but the debates that capoeiristas outside of Brazil are having in regard to the 'proper' uses of capoeira.

Giving serious consideration to the ways in which performance forms are altered as they flow between groups can deepen our understanding of how those groups relate to one another (see Desmond, 1994). I could discuss a number of different additions and alterations that have been made to capoeira – like the composition of songs in languages other than Portuguese – that would be equally provocative, but the topic of Halloween rodas came to my attention when I was interviewing a Brazilian contra-mestre (assistant master) about his group's involvement with social justice. He is phenotypically white-passing even though he is of mixed ancestry. At the time of our interview, he lived and taught capoeira Angola in a major U.S. city where he had moved years ago to be nearer a sibling who had also migrated to the U.S. We had been discussing his group's participation in a few high-profile, public protests when he said that he thought there needed to be more emphasis on this kind of civic engagement. He thinks people are "too passive" and are using capoeira inappropriately. It was then that he mentioned the Halloween rodas.

Initially, when he interrupted his own thought about protests and passivity to say he was going to write a letter on Facebook about the Halloween rodas, I did not see the connection. He said the people who participate in this roda are a "very nice group of people and everything, but I don't think they see the cultural appropriation that they're doing, and worse, those people are never around when protests are happening." Cultural appropriation is something that the general public seems to be increasingly aware of, whether that is thanks to celebrities like Beyoncé who have raised the profile of this issue through their advocacy – and others like the Kardashians through their foibles –

or through the actions of 'everyday people' who have resisted the uncritical usurpation of, for instance, the Vietnamese banh mi sandwich by a college cafeteria (Soave, 2015), or questioned the way in which yoga's spiritual aspects have often been stripped away to satisfy the U.S. fitness crowd's desire for a new workout trend (Fish, 2006). But why was this particular event being labeled an example of cultural appropriation?

During our initial interview, which took place in October of 2017, I asked if it was the bringing together of two unrelated traditions that he felt was inappropriate. His response made it clear that it was not the fusion of two unrelated traditions *per se* that was inappropriate, but the value system associated with Halloween that was problematic. He thinks it would be perfectly appropriate to have a roda in celebration of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or Marcus Garvey, for example, because "those [people] are relevant to African culture." I myself have participated in rodas that were dedicated to Dr. King and attended a march commemorating Martin Luther King Day with a group of capoeiristas. Using capoeira to celebrate holidays that are associated with consumerism (e.g., Christmas) or oppression (e.g., Columbus Day), however, he sees as being antithetical to the capoeira tradition. As we talked, we agreed that a roda honoring Columbus would be laughably inappropriate, considering the tragic chain of reactions that followed his so-called 'discovery' of the New World (e.g., epidemic diseases, rape of indigenous women, murder and enslavement of Indigenous peoples as well as Africans, etc.). Using a roda as a *protest* of Columbus Day or a celebration of Indigenous Peoples' Day, on the other hand, would be in keeping with the spirit of capoeira and would therefore not be problematic.

As will be discussed below, Halloween drew particular ire not only because of its association with fun and frivolity, but because my interlocutor saw it as a White American invention focused on gross consumerism. Stepping back for a moment, the prominence of vegetables in Halloween decorations (e.g., jack-o-lanterns, corn-husk scarecrows, and squash of all shapes and sizes) suggests that the holiday is not entirely a modern, commercial fabrication and that it indeed has connections with agricultural harvest celebrations. Nor is it uniquely American, as folklorists have recorded antecedents to the contemporary holiday in multiple parts of Europe (see Santino, 1983). However, when I conducted fieldwork in Brazil in 2008, I was told that Halloween was only gradually coming to be celebrated there and that locally it was seen as an importation from the U.S., which likely colors his perception of the holiday.¹

Just prior to one such scheduled event, this contra-mestre used Facebook to make public his views on Halloween rodas. In the following section, I present excerpts of the original letter and the

1 Incidentally, while Halloween is a foreign imposition, the state of São Paulo celebrates The Day of Saci on October 31st and the tradition may be diffusing beyond this region. Saci-Pererê is a one-legged, impish folk hero with dark skin who wears a red hat and smokes a pipe. He is notorious for pulling pranks and working to protect the natural environment in which he lives. Growing celebration of this holiday in Brazil may be an act of resistance against the spread of Halloween into Brazil. I communicated with one American-born capoeira instructor in the U.S. who is teaching her students about this holiday alongside their celebration of Dia de los Muertos and Halloween, though I expect it will take considerable time for this tradition to spread in capoeira groups outside of Brazil (if it indeed ever does).

ensuing dialog along with my interpretation of the various rhetorical moves being made. My interpretations stem not only from having researched capoeira for approximately twenty years, but also from a hermeneutic analysis of the text itself. My goal in this article is not to argue for or against celebrating Euro-American holidays like Halloween with a special roda, but to explore the ways in which these arguments are being made by members of the capoeira community. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the ways in which practitioners are grappling with the ethics of performing a cultural art in new, global contexts. Rather than consuming the Other in their construction of an individualistic lifestyle (see Chaney, 1996), these individuals exhibit reflexivity in their careful and critical questioning of what is best for the continuation of the art and the future audiences that may be drawn to it.

THE FACEBOOK LETTER

In the following discussion, I refer to my primary consultant as OP, for original poster, and to the other individuals as R1 through R8 (R is for respondent and the number corresponds to the order in which they entered the conversation).² In the interest of space, I have not reproduced the entire conversation; however, quotes taken directly from OP's letter have been presented in bold. Readers who wish to see his words uninterrupted by my interpretation can just focus on the bolded text.

OP began his address with a familiar salutation, "**Hello camaradas,**" which literally translates as comrade and connotes engagement in a common mission. Thus, his entire message is being phrased in terms of coalition building rather than being confrontational. He continues by stating, "**I'm here to express my opinion on this event that [has] been taking place in [our city] for a few years... this Halloween themed roda...**"

Although OP describes this as an event that has been taking place for a few years within the specific city where he is located, similar Halloween rodas (pronounced hoe-dahs, giving the name of this event an alliterative quality) happen throughout the U.S. and the world. At the time of writing, a Google search for the term "Halloween capoeira roda" yields numerous hits with announcements of upcoming events in various cities across North America. There are also many YouTube posts featuring videos taken at these events, which are typically done in costume. Interestingly, though OP describes Halloween as a particularly American holiday, there are also evidently Halloween rodas taking place in Australia, Canada, Colombia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

OP stated "**...at first, a few years ago, I didn't care much about it, not my cup of tea, but whatever... now days, this has been bothering me a little bit more, and here is why...**" In this

statement, OP is hinting at the growth he has experienced in terms of how he thinks about social justice. In two separate conversations I had with OP, he described to me the ways in which he had become increasingly aware of and passionate about social issues that – at an earlier stage of his development – he might not have recognized as an issue. What he might have dismissed earlier as a matter of personal preference has become, instead, a case of social injustice that needs to be addressed formally.

In his letter, he went on to state that "**capoeira has a political history that no one can deny...**" The ellipsis is in the original text. That he does not feel the need to expand upon this political history suggests that the audience he is addressing is, or should be, well aware of what that political history is. To what is he referring? Although this greatly oversimplifies the historical complexity, he is referring to the pervasive belief among many, if not most, capoeiristas that the martial utility of the form, which was brought to Brazil from Africa as a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade, was disguised as dance to keep the enslavers from understanding its lethal potential. Coming at this topic from the perspective of an anthropologist rather than a historian, the veracity of this claim is largely outside of my concern (see Green, 2003); what matters to me is how the widespread belief in and commitment to this discourse affects the actions taken within any given community of practice.

Following his allusion to this political history, OP continues by saying that "**there is an urgency to society to negate almost anything that has African roots in it, either here or in Brasil, or pretty much anywhere...**" OP himself does not identify as Black. Hailing from São Paulo state, his family identifies primarily with their European ancestors and upon asking whether or not his family had any Black ancestry, his grandmother vigorously denied it, suggesting a prejudice that was a surprise for OP to discover. Thus, he has witnessed this desire to negate Blackness in his home country, and he has also experienced it in the U.S. Given the ambiguity of his phenotype, he has been caught in the conflict between ethnic minorities on the streets of his city with each group assuming he is Other. One encounter even led to him being chased by a group of youth who eventually retreated after he was forced to take a stand and demonstrate his fighting prowess.

OP's letter continues with a reminder that he and his fellow capoeiristas "**have a responsibility with the artform, [whether] you like it or not... our responsibility goes way beyond going to classes, learning the techniques, songs, etc...**" In other words, dedicating oneself to the form is a necessary but insufficient condition for truly being a capoeirista, which is similar to an argument I have made in my book-length analysis of legitimacy in the translocal world of capoeira (Miller Griffith, 2016). Including his comrades in this mission, he continues by

² While I recognize the clumsiness of this nomenclature, I have selected it out of respect for the privacy of the people whose words are shared here. Although OP sent me a direct link to this conversation, which takes place in a public forum, I nonetheless have taken steps to protect the identity of people who may or may not want to be permanently associated with their words here.

writing **“we have a moral duty to make sure that [they] do not introduce more foreign elements to capoeira than it already has...”** Thus, he acknowledges that capoeira as we know it today has already experienced some degree of transformation. He does not specify when these foreign elements were added. Some might say that capoeira has always included foreign elements – not only were various African traditions combined in the new milieu of colonial Brazil, but non-Africans in Brazil influenced its development as well

OP says that these foreign introductions **“don't add anything to capoeira.”** In other words, it is already in and of itself a complete system. But this is not his primary objection to foreign introductions. Many capoeiristas have told me that it takes a lifetime to learn capoeira, something that OP reiterates in his assertion that capoeiristas should avoid introducing foreign elements because **“there is so much to learn still”** and none of them have fully mastered all that capoeira has to offer. Because they still have so much left to learn, they are not in any position **“to try to amend the art form to fit [their] vision.”**

He laments the fact that **“...these days we have many people that will sacrifice very little to do capoeira, and most likely they will kill some aspects of capoeira just to fit their agenda...”** Previously he had told me that “it’s a luxury [to have] capoeira, and they just take that for granted in a way.” Because he has seen so many people take capoeira for granted, he urges capoeiristas to be cautious in terms of what they associate capoeira with, like the Halloween roda. In his Facebook post, he explained that **“Halloween is a very white and imposed holiday that has nothing to do with capoeira or its history.”**

OP said he knows **“capoeira is about freedom”** but that there is a difference between having the freedom to do something and actually doing it. Essentially, he is asking his readers to consider whether or not their actions are honoring the legacy of the enslaved Africans, free Blacks, and others who fought to preserve the art form of capoeira in spite of legal and social persecution. In concluding his letter, he calls for a respectful and collaborative dialog that will help the entire community think about how associations such as this are affecting the portrayal of capoeira.

THE RESPONSES

Respondent 1 (R1) said that he was “100% agreed” with OP’s position. And even though he has participated in the Halloween rodas in the past and has had fun, he recognizes that an individual’s perception of capoeira will be influenced by the first roda they witness. However, he continues by saying that in the short time he has been practicing capoeira he has witnessed a good deal of change and asks if this is not just “part of [the] evolution of capoeira.” He clarifies that he is not exactly supporting the Halloween roda but considering how to best attract people into capoeira.

Respondent 2 (R2) concurred, saying that using “familiar customs” could draw people into capoeira, which would lead to

opportunities to educate them about “the history of capoeira and its people.” This is a position that I have seen in several Facebook dialogs, including an even more recent discussion about whether or not it is appropriate for corporate entities like Red Bull to sponsor capoeira competitions. Detractors tend to claim that any association between capoeira and commerce blunts the revolutionary potential of the art whereas more Machiavellian supporters claim that virtually any pathway into capoeira is positive if it ultimately allows those newcomers to experience the benefits of capoeira.

Respondent 3 (R3) respectfully responded to those two individuals, acknowledging their position, but returning to OP’s plea that the local capoeira community fulfil their “duty to preserve the Afro-Brazilian roots.” This individual expressed ambiguity towards the “evolution” of capoeira, recognizing that things will inevitably change as capoeira is introduced to new societies and modified to be “more approachable/attractive” to those audiences, but asks how much change capoeira can withstand before it becomes “something entirely different.” Of particular concern for this commenter is that the elements being forgotten or denied are African, which is “quite insidious.” I would add to this that they are reflective of a broader pattern of cultural appropriation rather than cultural appreciation. R1 agreed, reiterating his respect for the cultures and traditions of capoeira. He puts the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of the spectators to critically evaluate what they are witnessing and on the participants to make it clear that these are two separate traditions. His additional comments clarified his initial position that a Halloween themed event will not replace the traditional values or “hurt capoeira” in the long run.

R2 agreed with R3 that capoeira and other cultural traditions need to be protected and that it is the duty of practitioners to do that. At the same time, however, practitioners also have the duty to spread awareness of their art and, in the case of capoeira, teach others about the sacrifices of the ancestors who kept capoeira alive despite the challenges of racism and poverty that have been and continue to be relevant issues in Brazil as well as in the U.S. What R2 wants to make clear is that holding a special capoeira event on Halloween is not altering the value system of capoeira; rather, it is changing the focus of Halloween “from the commercial shit storm it has become and bringing it back to something with substance.” Without going into depth on the fact that most if not all holidays are invented traditions (see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), what emerges in this dialog is the staking out of two important positions. Whereas OP is arguing that Halloween is a reflection of Americans’ consumerism, R2 looks back to the more distant origins of festivals like Halloween that mark “the changing of the season and the harvests.”

According to OP’s interpretation, associating capoeira with Halloween is tantamount to selling out an Afro-Brazilian cultural tradition. The second reading by R2 suggests the possibility of redemption for a Euro-American one. Of particular interest to me, though a full exploration of this is outside the scope of this particular paper, is the way in which these two interpretations

align with larger debates going on in American society. Regarding the former, the past few years have seen an exponential rise in the awareness of issues related to cultural appropriation. With respect to the latter, even White people who believe themselves to be committed to anti-racist work often look to people of color to provide them with education and/or absolution without thinking of how these demands constitute an additional microaggression.

Yet another commenter objected to the basic premise of the discussion. After initially saying “it may not be my place to speak here...” Respondent 4 (R4) presented his interpretation that Halloween and capoeira were completely unrelated and that their playful combination in this particular event was inconsequential. OP, who not only initiated this entire discussion but who also retains a significant amount of power because of his title and the legitimacy that is often granted to Brazilians within this social field, responded directly to his comment first by saying that R4 did indeed have a right to express himself in this forum and second by thanking him for expressing his thoughts. OP then presents a previously unexpressed aspect of his objection to the association of capoeira with Halloween. One of his concerns is that if doing a Halloween roda becomes a “tradition,” it also becomes an expectation that every group will offer one. Failing to offer one might be interpreted as a group “not [being] ‘in’ with the new movement of capoeira...” To further explain, he offers a parallel example. He said that at one point, people asked him when his maculêlé class was. Maculêlé is a stick-fighting tradition that is also associated with Brazil but is different from capoeira. When he explained that his group does not do maculêlé, he says “the person was like ‘what you mean? don’t you do capoeira???’... as if for me to do capoeira I have to do maculêlé...” This comment suggests another of the main issues at stake within this debate: to what extent can the uninformed public be expected to discern between ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ capoeira and a hybrid form that has been adapted to local tastes/customs without regard for the political history of the art?

Aside from the possibility that it might contribute to the proliferation of mistaken assumptions about what capoeira is, OP argues that the Halloween roda “brings nothing to capoeira at all” and that “there is no relation with anything African based for this roda.” Because Halloween does not have any element of social justice, nor is it a celebration of a marginalized group, OP does not deem this an appropriate combination, a stance that was taken both here and in the interview I conducted with him prior to his writing of the letter. Furthermore, OP objects to the fact that “most likely people just come [to the Halloween event] for the fun...” That’s not to say that having fun in and of itself is inappropriate or undesirable – and I personally delight in hearing capoeira games being described as *brincando*, a verb that connotes the joyful and carefree play of children – but, according to OP’s position, unreflexively elaborating a roda with extra ludic elements like costumes *just* for fun is problematic. OP reminds his readers that “capoeira is very political, any chance you have to make a statement, we have to do [so]... and not being part of such

a capitalist holiday may be a very nice way to protest [bullshit] like this.”

OP then responded directly to R2, acknowledging that it is important to bring people into capoeira, but resists the perceived need to cater to them:

I think [it] is part of our responsibility to show capoeira as close as it is, not to change so people can feel comfortable... the only audience that we should make an exception, it would be for the African diaspora community, no one else gets a pass on that... [especially] white people that have access to information and money... and again, its usually done on the expense of black culture... we need to be very careful how we show capoeira to other people... otherwise we are just being part of the circus.

This is an incredibly complex response that encapsulates several positions within the capoeira community. First is his acknowledgement that some aspects of capoeira may make people feel uncomfortable. Though he does not specify which aspects might trigger resistance, given his earlier references to the political history of capoeira and its association with resisting oppression, he is most likely referencing these issues, which also have a significant racial component to them. Second, he says that the only community that it might be worth accommodating would be the African Diaspora community. He does not expand upon what kinds of changes might be made in service of this community, but his mention of this population is consistent with his stance on the centrality of Africans and African-descended peoples within capoeira.

Respondent 5 (R5) then enters the conversation asking for more contextualizing information about the Halloween roda. She asks whether the roda is geared towards outsiders, as the recruitment argument suggests, or if it is a closed event for the capoeira community. Addressing OP, she says “...from what is being said, part of the reason you don’t like doing [a] Halloween roda is because you want to make it clear what people are watching. It’s no one’s ‘job’ to educate anyone outside of the roda.” She insists that no matter what one wears – whether it is a ‘traditional’ uniform or “a batman costume” – the activity itself is unchanged and the mettle of a capoeirista will be tested by his or her efficacy inside the roda. She then continues to argue that “if you want to take the time to spread the gospel and promote your group, then by all means, do it,” but she does not think it is the responsibility of capoeiristas to police their representations of the art for the sake of an outsider who may or may not eventually join the community.

Six minutes after posting this comment, R5 replied to her own comment saying that “we all know what we are doing and why we are doing it. But if someone wants to put together a roda on Halloween to play with friends, there’s no difference in what is being worn other than looking silly.” She points out that even the white pants and shirt worn by many groups was not part of capoeira until recently but became “mainstreamed” because it was useful in the academy setting in part because the use of cords

provided incentive to train hard and progress through the hierarchy. Although this addendum seems to weaken her argument that the clothing worn is inconsequential, because the adoption of cords and the uniform has in fact changed capoeira, she maintains that a capoeirista's attention should not be on what is worn during a roda, but on how he or she can contribute to the energy of the group.

OP thanked R5 for her comments, but focused on the pedagogical potential of the roda, saying "first things first, a roda is a place of education." Both the participants and whatever audience may be present are cast as learners in this scenario. He argues that advanced capoeiristas, especially those who have begun teaching capoeira classes, have a responsibility to educate practitioners and outsiders alike as to what capoeira is and what makes it unique. He says, "whether you like or not, or even whether you know or not, most of the learning of capoeira is done inside the roda... so there is a responsibility from all of us to make sure that that is happening in a proper way, and it's an even bigger responsibility from people that are in leadership position within capoeira to understand and make sure that we are not utilizing capoeira 'just for fun'..."

This is the second time OP has expressed his feeling that capoeira should not be "just for fun." He understands that some people will only care about having fun, but that capoeira is "much more than that." He then argues that "when this roda started years ago, for sure the people that started had not yet paid their dues to capoeira, and they were already introducing something 'just for fun.'" This is a reiteration of his original point that one should not presume to alter capoeira until he or she has attained sufficient mastery of it, something that my interlocutors tell me will take more than a single lifetime. To put it in a slightly different manner, according to OP, the people who started the Halloween roda in this city do not have the legitimacy needed to have an innovation of this nature ratified by individuals who consider themselves caretakers of this cultural tradition. Even he would not presume to be in a position to modify the art because he considers learning capoeira a lifetime endeavor.

OP reiterates that "we," presumably including all capoeiristas regardless of how long they have been practicing, the style they play, their nationality, or their 'race,' "have a responsibility with the art form itself..." Despite the earlier points made by respondents 1 through 4, which had to do with how outsiders would view the fusion of capoeira and Halloween, OP clarifies that as far as he knows, the particular roda he is referencing is closed to the public. In other words, what outsiders would make of it is not the key issue because the only participants would be those already involved in the tradition. Focusing on that misses his point. OP's concern is with "how capoeiristas are presenting capoeira to each other." That some people feel the need to add to or alter capoeira "to make [capoeira] 'fun'" is offensive to him. Every roda is its own opportunity for both fun and education. Adding insult to injury is the fact that what is being added is "a very white and American holiday." It is emblematic of larger cultural processes that continue to alienate people of color, which

is why he thinks capoeira should be fighting against it rather than allowing it to enter and influence their community.

The following extended excerpt is representative of OP's position on how the adaptation of capoeira to fit (White) American sensibilities or interests distorts the key values of capoeira:

...its our responsibility to give back to the black community what is theirs... but no, we want to say that capoeira is about freedom and for everyone... yes, capoeira is about those things, but if [it] is not good for everyone, then [it] is no good to no one... we are not reaching out to the same people that would be doing capoeira back in the days... its not as "fun" to do that... so lets keep ourselves entertained during Halloween and have a roda like there is nothing else to think about but our costumes... that for me is hypocrisy... to say that you do something but actually not even being aware of what you are doing... kicking your legs up high is so easy compared to what one should be doing with capoeira... but most people will think that because they kick so high and so fast, that they are already capoeiristas... people that call themselves capoeiristas and cannot play berimbau nicely, and I mean play the berimbau, not make some noise... people that cannot talk about capoeira... cannot talk about the history of many mestres... people that don't pay proper respect to the older mestres that are still around... that's hypocrisy for me...

The first point is that capoeira is a Black art. Regardless of his own ethnic background, he is aligning himself with the Afro-centric school of thought regarding capoeira's origins, which is in keeping with the message of his academy's founding mestres. Second, he addresses the issue of freedom. Though not entirely spelled out here, he is referencing two interpretations of freedom. He appears to take as a given that both the pro- and anti- Halloween roda groups associate capoeira with freedom. He suggests that the pro-Halloween roda group associates capoeira with individual freedom, the freedom to practice capoeira in whatever way they see fit. He personally associates capoeira with the fight for freedom from oppression, a position that is again consistent with his lineage. This freedom from oppression should ideally encompass all people, so if capoeira does not benefit all people, its overall value is diminished. From this perspective, using capoeira in a private event for the entertainment of a few privileged people is an example of hypocrisy. This passage concludes with a condemnation of people who give primacy to the physical aspects and entertainment value of capoeira without dedicating themselves equally to the less 'fun' aspects like the history of the art, honoring the mestres who have kept the tradition alive, or even playing the berimbau properly.

Five people responded to this comment – and one of those comments received an additional 11 responses. Some of these comments had to do with the 'tradition' of holding capoeira rodas and others were more personal in nature. The first, Respondent 6 (R6), thanked OP for bringing awareness of this issue to the community. Next, R2 wrote, "this post and thread are great, I encourage more discussions about capoeira in this group and hope

to see more knowledge and philosophy be shared and talked about in an open and mutually respectable manner. Thank you [OP] for opening this discussion and thank you to all the other [capoeiristas] who contributed, regardless of any view points, it's just good to see the discussion happen." A third comment, in Portuguese, said "finally" there is someone speaking the truth about this issue. While recognizing that differences exist within the community, these three comments taken together would seem to be concluding the dialog. However, the next comment reinvigorated the debate and introduced some new issues that warrant special attention.

This is Respondent 7's (R7) first engagement with the conversation. Although their relationship is not clear, he explains that he has been involved with capoeira for 12 years and during that time, he and R2 "have done our best to honor the Martial Art and [its] culture along the way." His work involves working with kids and doing community service through capoeira. R7 does host an annual costume party for his students as well as their friends and families and he explains that it has the dual purpose of bringing them happiness and introducing "capoeira to an audience that wouldn't naturally cross paths with the art." He has witnessed change within capoeira over the decade he has been playing, but rather than seeing this as inherently negative, he sees it as the result of good-hearted people striving to make a difference in the lives of their communities. He agrees that "the integrity of capoeira's origin needs to [be] preserved but a closed Halloween Costume Roda for friends to get together and INCLUDE Capoeira in their annual tradition (Halloween) should be flattering, NOT invasive." He then goes on to provide a brief commentary about the debate itself:

To voice your opinions is good. Discussion is how we improve and evolve (like capoeira has and continues to). Just make sure these opinions come from a good and humble place with capoeira in mind and not just an idea of capoeira from a spiritual or cultural aspect only. Capoeira will continue to adapt and evolve because at the end of the day, capoeira is meant to survive the struggle and flourish...One thing with all have in common is that we LOVE and HONOR capoeira.

R7 is the first individual in this dialog to publicly challenge the assumption that capoeira is also a spiritual practice or that it is inherently tied to a set of cultural practices (whether one construes that culture as Brazilian or African). R7 essentially paints a picture of capoeira's future as untethered from specific cultural and spiritual traditions but maintaining unity through practitioner's shared love of the art itself. The "struggle" in this case is not against a specific enemy, as was the case during slavery, or mindset, as is the case today as capoeiristas like OP use capoeira to fight social injustice. Rather, the struggle as R7 construes it is against whatever forces might threaten the art form's survival.

There are 11 comments in reply to this post. Several are personal in nature (e.g., friends who have lost touch reconnecting), but some are focused explicitly on the content of what R7 wrote. R6 in particular engaged with R7 in a substantive manner, thanking

him both for his insights and for the service he does in teaching children. But then he questions what cultural values Halloween advances. R6 affirms that capoeira "can be introduced through various mediums/events," and many of these events would be improved by the inclusion of capoeira, but he hopes "no child ever happens to describe [capoeira] as 'you know that Halloween dance thing they do' because all who just see it will not be taught." In other words, R6 is reiterating the previously shared concerns that the full meaning of capoeira will not be understood by people who see it out of context. Identifying himself as an older individual, he says that he has witnessed the degradation of virtually every tradition that has not been safeguarded.

R7 responded to this comment by saying that he does not think the children he works with conflate capoeira and Halloween just because of a single event. He agrees that the roots of capoeira need to be preserved and then says:

Here is what I think... great instructors pass along great lessons. Poor instructors do the opposite. A good teacher can evolve and not insult. Capoeira is global and keeps growing. So many people doing BIG things with capoeira, everyone has a place! I really don't see harm in reaching out to the public this way. In this event I see community, love and support. I see happiness and laughter... I see an instructor bringing people together and that takes a good heart and lots of work. It can be done in any way but this just so happens to be a great opportunity to get folks together and embrace what they have gained from capoeira and do it together with others who feel the same. This roda is a great platform to promote unity/community.

In much the same way that OP did when connecting capoeira to the fight for freedom from oppression, R7 connects capoeira with larger principles that he sees as being the essential values of capoeira: love, support, happiness, and community. R6 reiterates his concern about "outside untaught eyes" and how they will view this fusion, but ultimately backs off of his critique. He concludes by saying "thanks for your insights capoeira has found a safe place with your wise guidance."

OP also responded directly to R7, thanking him for his insights, but then asking why it is that people feel like "we have to bend capoeira to please people so much?!" Here he raises the issue of capoeira rodas that celebrate other holidays as well, like Kwanzaa, Juneteenth, Black history month, or Martin Luther King Day. Despite these being Afro-centric celebrations, he warns against "just bending capoeira to please the system" because "capoeira was born to fight against this system." He says he "would like to see how many parents would bring their kids to a celebration that is mainly part of the African diaspora culture." Again, he urges caution in organizing events that are about having 'fun' and emphasizes that capoeira events should impart additional information that children or other audiences are unlikely to get from other sources. For example, he says he "would love to see how many people would show up just for a get together to talk about race and police brutality."

R6 responded to this comment by OP, praising him for his deep insight and valuable questions. Referencing what he has witnessed in his lifetime, he writes “it’s always difficult to determine how or if to combine tradition with current flow of today’s bent.” In essence, he is valorizing both of the main positions taken in the debate by acknowledging the complexity of the issue and that there may not be a clear-cut answer. He expresses his gratitude for the conversation because they are all, regardless of age, perpetually learning and concludes by saying he will encourage others to voice their perspectives as well.

R2 rejoins the conversation here and comments on the beauty of capoeira taking hold in new cultures. He explains that he was drawn into capoeira through b-boying, which contextualizes his support for demonstrations of the art in various contexts as a recruitment tool. But for him, as he admits, he does not play capoeira for spiritual or identity-based reasons. He says he does “capoeira just the way a Jiu Jitsu practitioner or a Wing Chun trainer or a Chess player would.” He acknowledges OP’s position and the reasons he so fervently defends the tradition, but asks that his perspective and reasons for practicing capoeira be respected too:

Our leaders are from Bahia and they do not think this is wrong or offensive. Maybe because capoeira is more mental and athletic than spiritual. In our group, we have [professional boxers] that fight on HBO, pro MMA that fight on TV, BJJ Black Belts. We come from a group where capoeira is a martial art too. I don't see how this roda would affect capoeira in a bad way. But I do see how capoeira can affect all these [people] in a good way. I think it's all a matter of perspective.

First, note that R2 legitimizes his stance by referencing that his group’s leaders are not only Brazilian, but from the region most closely associated with ‘traditional’ capoeira. While it is entirely possible that the other respondents know R2 from face-to-face contexts or at least have a better sense of his affiliations based on other engagements with him, this is the first time in the dialog that he describes his group in any degree of detail. From this description, it is likely that he is a capoeira contemporânea player as this style tends to foreground the martial utility of the art and is more likely to have members that cross-over into the boxing and mixed martial arts worlds.

Given the turn in the dialog towards efficacy and martial utility, it is not surprising that, the next respondent, Respondent 8 (R8) references Mestre Bimba, founder of the regional style.

I'm sure Mestre Bimba was faced with the same criticisms when we began teaching in the privileged universities of Brasil. Mestre Bimba himself brought in elements of other martial arts such as the colored cord system found in some Asian arts. Every person who practices capoeira will add an element of their own style, culture and faith, while at the same time taking elements of capoeira with them. But the capoeira we practice today is much different than the capoeira before Mestre Bimba. And yet the soul of capoeira

flows from its roots and through its many branches. Even Candamble is a mixture of Yoruba, Islam, and catholicism. And yet you will be hard-pressed to find it mentioned or honored in many American capoeira studios...

Here I want to interject that in Angola academies it is not uncommon to find Candomblé being discussed. In the school where I trained for six years, students were very much aware of Candomblé and the mestre was open to discussing his own experiences with the religion. One White, American member had even gone through the initial steps of being initiated into Candomblé on an extended visit to Brazil. The deities are also revered in song and orixa dance is sometimes demonstrated or taught at capoeira Angola events. So, while I am not accusing R8 of being disingenuous, I think there may be some limitations to his perspective.

R8 argues that “the berimbau itself is actually an instrument to summon ancestral spirits during ritualized practices of capoeira and yet this is very close to the original premise of Halloween. Hmmm...” The point here seems to be to point out underlying similarities that one could – if he or she wished – use as a justification for the fusion of these holidays. In many respects, it is similar to the ‘out of Africa’ argument that is sometimes used to justify appropriation of African arts/culture (i.e., if we are all ultimately descended from an African mitochondrial Eve, then anyone can lay claim to any African culture). But from the “hmmm...” that has been added on to the end of this statement, it is not entirely clear if R8 even buys his own argument or is just throwing it out there as a way of showing disdain for the entire thread.

R8 then continues by saying:

But this is nothing new. Every ancient martial art evolves in some area but the heart and soul remain. [There] is always a source that any practitioner can look back to in order to reference [its] authentic purpose. I have studied several arts, mostly Chinese martial arts, before my training in capoeira. It is easy for me to trace the roots of the Shaolin, but it goes even further back. Same with capoeira. One may trace it only as far back as Mestre Bimba, but then there's Mestre Pistinha [sic], and then other Brazilian mestres before them and some would even look at African martial arts which spawned capoeira as the original. In the end, we just have to keep an open mind and constantly dig deep, and amass as much knowledge on the subject as possible and then spread what we gather out of love and respect.

Without being explicit about it, R8 is raising a few thorny issues. One of which is why Bimba or Pastinha – the founders of the regional and Angola styles, respectively – are considered to be the authoritative sources for legitimacy. Is this not hegemonic in a way and ultimately dismissive of other capoeiristas? Another uncomfortable issue he raises is that capoeira itself is an invention, “spawned” from an earlier African form. His solution is not to go back to Africa and try to identify antecedent forms or close cousins that are still being practiced today, which is being

done by some Angoleiros that are particularly committed to researching and promoting the African roots of capoeira. Rather, he is suggesting that everyone make a good faith effort to learn as much as they can and share the art in this same spirit.

DISCUSSION

Although his key points are distributed throughout the conversation, OP's position can be summarized as follows: (1) Do not presume that you are accomplished enough to alter an art that takes a lifetime to learn; (2) Do not add anything to capoeira, especially if that addition reflects a Euro-American history/value-system rather than an African one; (3) Make sure that your practice of capoeira honors the sacrifices made by Africans and African-descended people who are both responsible for the art and continually marginalized by an oppressive social system; and (4) Remember that capoeira is not just about having fun, but is a political tool.

OP's first point will raise little controversy. It is widely understood that capoeira can become a life-long project (see Downey, 2005, see also Capoeira, 2006), and an individual will progress through many stages on his or her journey to becoming a capoeirista (Almeida, 1986). Delicately balancing one's execution of proper form out of respect for tradition with individual creativity and improvisational prowess is a difficult task that is best learned under certain pedagogical conditions (Miller Griffith, 2014), and may even necessitate undertaking a local, regional, or major apprenticeship pilgrimage in order to accomplish (see Miller Griffith and Marion, 2018). It is his other points, however, that seem to have ignited this debate.

His second and third points – that Euro-American cultural additions to capoeira are inappropriate and that all practice of capoeira should honor the African Diaspora – are two facets of a single underlying value: the African Diaspora must be given primacy within the practice of capoeira regardless of where that practice takes place. It would be easy to assume that Brazilians will advocate for the protection of capoeira on the basis of national pride and African Americans would do the same based on ethnic pride, but reality of course is far more complicated. An interesting situation emerges when we consider that, within this particular dialog, a non-Black Brazilian (OP) is advocating for the protection of capoeira as an African Diaspora creation, while some African American respondents are justifying the use of capoeira in conjunction with Euro-American celebrations like Halloween. According to Assunção, "older mestres did not necessarily see Afrocentric approaches and one's pride in being Brazilian as mutually exclusive" (2007, p. 207); however, in contemporary times affinity for an Africanist or a Brazilianist capoeira origin story has become politicized and divisive (Assunção, 2007). Much of the time, these debates have to do with the vexing issue of authenticity.

As a social scientist, it is tempting to throw up my hands and say that nothing can be considered 'authentic' because the very

concept is a social construct designed to privilege certain arts, artists, interpretations, etc. as legitimate and others less so. Despite numerous scholars having already analyzed different interpretations of authenticity (see Lindholm, 2007) and the desire to find it in the lives and works of others (e.g., MacCannell, 1976), debates over authenticity continue to be relevant because they are central to the experience of elective affinity groups in the global era. Debates over authenticity are most visible in genres that are at risk of being "[assimilated] by and into a larger culture" (Kahf, 2007, p. 365), which is at the heart of the issue OP raises. To many readers, the idea of doing a capoeira roda at Halloween – and even wearing costumes while doing so – may seem innocent enough. But when viewed as emblematic of the larger trend to make capoeira fit into the preexisting routines of American practitioners, rather than practitioners remaking themselves to become better defenders of the tradition, it becomes easier to see OP's point.

Glocalization can be defined as what happens when a particular cultural practice enters the flows of globalization and becomes modified by the people who adopt it (see Robertson, 1995). Glocalization is most contentious when it is the globally powerful who adopt the cultural products of the less-powerful Other, especially if it is done uncritically without attention to how this entitlement to borrow further marginalizes the very people they think they are honoring. While the majority of respondents in this dialog exhibit a high degree of reflexivity with regard to their practice of capoeira, it is worth entertaining OP's position that this kind of appropriation is harmful.

Here it may be worth a small thought experiment. OP was critical of capoeira being used to celebrate *Halloween*, but what about using it to celebrate *Día de los Muertos*? First, it is necessary to underscore that *Día de los Muertos* is not a Mexican version of Halloween although they overlap calendrically. *Día de los Muertos* is an invitation to the souls of the departed to return to the realm of the living to be remembered and celebrated. The altar is perhaps the most recognizable symbol of this holiday, decorated as it is with bright flowers that attract the attention of the dead, photos that commemorate them, and food and drink that they enjoyed in life (see Royce, 2011). People often dress in bright clothing or skeleton costumes to celebrate this holiday though the highly recognizable *Catrina* face painting that many people now wear on *Día de los Muertos* only came about after a satirical painting done by Jose Guadalupe Posada in 1910. Though it is increasingly celebrated by people without Mexican ancestry, on the surface at least it seems to retain more cultural and spiritual meaning than does modern-day Halloween. This leads me to ask if OP and the respondents who took his side would be equally upset about rodas celebrating *Día de los Muertos*.

This is something that certainly could, and should, be debated by the capoeira community. However, my instinct based on conversations with capoeiristas, long-term involvement in the community, and review of videos of capoeiristas holding special *Día de los Muertos* rodas is that for capoeiristas like OP, it would be an acceptable fusion of cultural traditions. In the videos of *Día*

de los Muertos rodas that I have seen, the only additions are the inclusion of skull face paint, decoration of the training space with *papel picado* (colorful punched paper that often adorns Dia de los Muertos altars), and some costumes. Contreras Islas (2021) has also documented some capoeira groups in Mexico creating special songs to honor deceased mestres and singing them in conjunction with the holiday. That final detail aside, much the same could be said for Halloween rodas. In all regards they are typical rodas with the exception of costumes, some of which are elaborate and perhaps outlandish. So why is it I think OP *might* find the former acceptable and the latter problematic enough that he felt the need to address the community in a public manner? I am basing this on two assumptions: (1) Dia de los Muertos is not read as a White cultural tradition even if it has ties to Spain (i.e. Catholicism); (2) it originated among a people (Aztecs) who were marginalized during Spanish colonialism much like Africans were during Portuguese colonialism. My hypothesis is that capoeiristas are more amenable to globalization when the additional elements originate in a culture that has experienced colonialism or some other form of oppression/marginalization than they are when the people altering capoeira come from a globally powerful society.

Capoeira has always been a mixed, blended, or Creolized³ art form depending on what language one prefers. But not all innovations receive pushback that is framed in terms of cultural appropriation. Lipiäinen (2015, p. 682) provocatively asks "[a]t what point does a cultural practice become so transnational that its origins no longer wholly define it?" Working within the Russian context, Lipiäinen uses the lens of playfulness to interrogate the limits of innovations in capoeira. Many studies of creolization/hybridization have argued that the messiness of mobility and cultural mixing leads to creativity and innovation; however, this is not necessarily the case if practitioners of an art or cultural tradition rigidly police the boundaries of that tradition. Lipiäinen (2015, p. 685) explains that for many Russian capoeiristas, it is the "spirit and certain aesthetic dimensions of *capoeira angola* that attract them more than the formalities." Without wishing to read too much into this argument, it is quite likely for the capoeiristas Lipiäinen is describing, the freedom capoeira represents is what is centrally important and adherence to the cultural norms of a different society less so.

Contreras Islas (2021) has documented something similar among Mexican capoeiristas. His work provides an essential corrective to the oversimplified notion of capoeira having been spread throughout the world solely through the efforts of enterprising and mobile Brazilians. Furthermore, the portrait he paints is one in which Mexican capoeiristas feel empowered to reinvent traditions to express local concerns (e.g., singing songs for deceased mestres on Dia de los Muertos). Whether this empowerment comes from having less oversight by Brazilian mestres who are typically more apt to move to a cosmopolitan center in the U.S. or the U.K. than Mexico or because their

innovations are seen as being less threatening is unclear, but there does seem to be a difference in how much latitude different populations are given to modify or appropriate capoeira.

Is there a way out of this cultural appropriation quagmire? In their study of salsa and belly dance in the U.S., Bock and Borland (2011) argue that in many instances, people engage in Others' cultural arts not out of a feeling that the culture associated with the art is superior or inferior to their own, but because these cultural traditions provide an arena in which individuals can explore underdeveloped aspects of their own identities. This is similar to what Joseph and Falcous (2019) found in their study of New Zealanders' practice of capoeira. For Kiwi men, practicing capoeira presented new scripts for performing masculinity. They were able to dance and engage in forms of homosociability that are condoned in Brazilian culture but marked as aberrant in New Zealand. Cultural borrowing can be considered "a mimesis less focused on the mastery of the embodied other than on the actualization of a repressed self" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 5). Even when people are engaged in mimesis of the Other, paying attention to the ways in which they justify their participation in the cultural traditions of others (see Johnson, 2003) provides us with insight into what facets of their identities are most salient for them in different contexts. Based both on OP's comments and more than 35 interviews I have done, social justice activism is particularly salient for some, though certainly not all, capoeiristas in the U.S. and helps to explain the resonance they find in a traditionally Afro-Brazilian art (see Miller Griffith, 2023). This leads us to OP's fourth point, that capoeira is not just for fun, but should be seen as a serious political tool.

Da Silva Barreto (2016) writes not only as a sociology professor, but also as the co-founder of the Nzinga Institute of Capoeira Angola, known for promoting the growth of women and children within this traditionally male-dominated space. She asserts that the association between capoeira and resistance is one that originated within the Brazilian Black resistance movement. Thus, she argues it is a relatively new development, though the justification for it dates back to the earliest days of Brazilian slavery. This association between capoeira and resistance is frequently stressed when capoeiristas present their art to audiences with little to no previous knowledge about it. Many non-Brazilian capoeiristas will therefore encounter this discourse from their very earliest engagements with the art. Even if the focus of public performances shifts more towards producing and marketing "an agile body" than recruiting people into "an embodied performance of racial struggle" (Robitaille, 2015, p. 237), this discourse still tends to be present. Whether or not this political commitment is being honored in the day-to-day practice of capoeira, and how to best do so, is the primary issue in the Halloween roda debate. For OP and the people who aligned with him in this debate, mere lip service to the discourse of resisting

3 TJ Desch Obi (2012) has rightly critiqued the use of the term creole as it implies that there is a pure form against which the creolized form might be measured. All cultural practices change over time regardless of whether they have been globalized or not, and the myth of an unchanging pure form often indexes racist, colonialist assumptions about globalization.

oppression is insufficient if one's actions trivialize capoeira's potential to enact social justice.

CONCLUSION

A granular analysis of the rhetorical moves made in an online debate over the appropriateness of using capoeira to celebrate Halloween demonstrates how capoeiristas in the U.S. are striving to ensure that their practice *both* honors the longstanding traditions of capoeira *and* appeals to non-traditional demographics (e.g., White Americans). OP sparked a lively debate when he suggested that capoeira was being (mis)appropriated by those who hold and participate in Halloween rodas. As highlighted within my presentation of the responses to his critique, two camps quickly emerged: those that sided with OP and those that defended the Halloween rodas. The way in which the ensuing debate played out illuminates the beliefs of this community of practice. Several aspects of this conversation support my argument that capoeira groups are a space of consciousness-raising and, potentially, a catalyzing force that motivates engagement with social justice.

Even though the issues being discussed here are contentious, with one individual who is rich in cultural capital alleging that others are guilty of cultural appropriation and adulterating an African-Diaspora art with White/Euro-American practices, the discourse is remarkably civil. This is not necessarily something that can be said of other online debates in the capoeira social field, and I have witnessed conversations about related issues like whether capoeira is African or Brazilian become incredibly personal and mean. The civility of this conversation reflects the tone OP set in his original address to the community and is indicative of the respect they have for him. It is also worth mentioning here that there is at least some overlap between the virtual, imagined community that was having this dialog online and the embodied, face-to-face community that interacts at various capoeira events. In other words, the lack of total anonymity may have encouraged civility.

Although it may be a bit bold to argue that the absence of something is actually evidence, it is striking that throughout the dialog, no one felt the need to explain things like the "political history" of capoeira or the "[negation of] almost anything that has African roots in it." Nor did anyone challenge these particular points, which in other fora may have been incendiary. Thus, it seems safe to assume that the individuals involved in this discussion were at least familiar with the discourse that would give rise to such arguments, even if they dispute the best way to honor said political history or African roots.

Several of the issues that arose during the debate are significant insofar as they relate to larger debates over cultural appropriation and racial justice in U.S. society. Whether it is ethical, for example, to use a Diasporic art to redeem a seemingly corrupted Euro-American holiday, connects with wider debates over the ethics of relying on African Americans to educate well-meaning but naïve white Americans about racism. Another issue is the degree to which an individual's intentions (versus the impact of

those actions) should be considered when determining the rightness of cultural borrowing and glocalization. These issues are not easy to address and clearly no one person will have the authoritative position regarding how capoeira should be practiced in its translocal contexts, but the gravity and civility with which such questions are being considered within this community of practice suggests a hopeful future for capoeira outside of Brazil.

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