
A Postcolonial Point of View of Afro-Brazilian Culture and Its Relation to Contemporary African Popular Culture

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1. Introduction

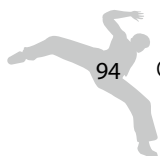
There have always been discussions about the origins of Afro-Latino culture or Afro-Brazilian culture from both the African perspective and the Latin American or Brazilian perspective. One of the most exclusive examples of that experience is Afro-Cuban music. Afro-Cuban music was and still is popular among Africans and African cultures. In Africa we have the following expressions to describe it: “a son who returned home after being embellished,” “the essence of African culture transformed by Latin flavor” and so on. For many African countries, with independence also came a discovery of Cuban music, which itself benefits from a hybrid of African and Spanish culture. For African musicians, Cuban music was a source of inspiration for contemporary and popular music accompanied with modern instruments. Cuban music is considered to have an African rhythm, which is not based on what they call “metropole” or colonizers’ culture. In the early 60s, during the postcolonial era several African countries adapted national culture politics and with their socialist orientation, close and direct cultural exchange with Cuban music was made possible. Furthermore, Cuban music came to add a new taste to African music and gave the opportunity for African musicians to experience a much more sophisticated rhythm and dance.

But for many culture analysts, the tendencies were always to look at the African origins within Cuban music, either in the rhythm, the sound or the style. But African musicians recognize that while the instruments in Cuban music were a totally new discovery for them, the rhythm fit to their traditional way of playing. Considering the relations and cultural exchange that existed between Cuba and Africa from a very early stage,

from an African perspective, the answer to the question of whether Cuban music has some African origins and the tendency to look for these origins in Africa seem quite different in comparison to art forms from other Caribbean, Latino or Brazilian cultures.

In this comment paper, I will try to discuss from different levels the complex relationship of Afro-Brazilian culture with Africa and its perception from an African perspective. Although Brazilians, especially those with African roots, seem to consider their cultural expressions as an identity and a tool of affiliation to their African origin, Africans see them as new imported culture, a popular culture from western countries. That is because most contemporary Brazilian, Afro-Latin or American cultures come to Africa through Europe (the metropolises). The matter of concern for them is why does rhythm of Latin or Brazilian music fit to Africa?

Firstly, I will point out how the Brazilian ritual art Capoeira, the form of which involves movement, music and philosophy, and which was granted a special protected status as “intangible cultural heritage” by UNESCO in November 2014, can be defined and perceived from an African perspective. Secondly, I will discuss the influence of colonialism on cultural development among slaves brought to different regions from Africa. Understanding the definition and structure of capoeira in comparison with similar cultural expressions in Africa is very important to analyze the postcolonial perspective of this cultural expression. Capoeira can be considered a postcolonial cultural expression or a culture of resistance against the colonizers by the colonized. Lastly, I will point out the meaning of capoeira and other Afro-Latino cultural expression to Africans.



2. Understanding of Capoeira from an African perspective

(1) Historical background of Capoeira

Some scholars have conducted historical and cultural research about the origin of Capoeira. Among them, Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, in her book *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance*, analyzes the outlooks on life, symbols, and rituals of the three major cultures that inspired capoeira—the Congolese (the historic area known today as Congo-Angola), the Yoruban, and the Catholic Portuguese cultures. As she traces the evolution of capoeira through successive historical eras, Talmon-Chvaicer maintains a dual perspective, depicting capoeira as it was experienced, observed, and understood by both Europeans and Africans, as well as by their descendants. This dual perspective uncovers many covert aspects of capoeira that have been repressed by the dominant Brazilian culture. This study reclaims the African origins and meanings of capoeira, while also acknowledging the many ways in which Catholic-Christian culture has contributed to it.

Brazil received most of the slaves brought from Africa with the transatlantic slave trade. According to some references, between 1500 and 1888, almost four million slaves were brought to Brazil coming mainly from West Africa. This large number of slaves was an important factor in shaping the culture and the people of the country, and led to the birth of capoeira. Many historical researches pointed out that capoeira resulted from slave trading, but exactly how it developed is still under discussion. Closely related arguments center around where the word capoeira comes from and how much the fighting movements were “disguised” as dance to allow them to be carried out under the watch of slave masters.

It is also said in many documents and researches that the Brazilian martial art and dance capoeira was born mainly among West African descendants but with native Brazilian influences, probably beginning in the 16th century. Some papers point out that capoeira’s history begins with the

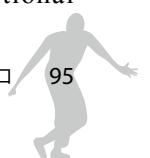
beginning of African slavery in Brazil. The early history of capoeira is still controversial, especially the period between the 16th century and the beginning of the 19th century, since historical documents were very scarce in Brazil at that time. But oral tradition, language and evidence leave little doubt about its Brazilian roots. Capoeira was born as a simple hope of survival. It was a tool with which an escaped slave, completely unequipped, could survive in the hostile, unknown land and face the hunt of the armed and mounted colonial agents who were charged with finding and capturing escapees.

Among capoeira styles, the Angola style refers to every capoeira that keeps the traditions held before the creation of the regional style. The name *Angola* goes back as early as the beginning of slavery in Brazil, when Africans, taken to Luanda to be shipped to the Americas, were called in Brazil “black people from Angola,” regardless of their nationality. The ideal of *Capoeira Angola* is to maintain capoeira as close to its roots as possible. Capoeira is related to the Kikongo word of *kipula* or *kipura*, which referred to sweeping ground movements used in martial arts. The connection of this etymology to capoeira is through movements, since the art of capoeira uses many ground movements and sweeps.

(2) African Wrestling Culture

The African continent has many types of traditional folk wrestling, which varies between regions and ethnic groups. In the Western part of Africa for instance, there is Laamb in Senegal, Boreh in Gambia, Evala in Togo, Koksowa in the Hausa areas of Nigeria and Niger and Dambe in Niger. In the South there is Nguni stick-fighting (*donga*, or *dlala 'nduku*) in South Africa, in the North Tahtib in Egypt, and in the East there is Donga in Ethiopia and so on. The similarity between these kinds of African traditional folk wrestling is that they are seasonal, in most of the cases held after harvest. It is always accompanied with music and rituals and held in a public space. Some of them serve as initiation rituals for boys.

The common point between these traditional



forms of wrestling and capoeira is that they exist primarily as a form of dancing not for actual fighting. The techniques and performers are selected and initiated by the people.

In Africa, a few wrestling styles more similar to capoeira also exist as well. The most popular is Moraingy. It is a weaponless, bare-fisted striking style of traditional martial arts that originated in Madagascar. It has since become popularized throughout Madagascar, but particularly in coastal regions, and has spread to neighboring Indian Ocean islands, including Réunion, Mayotte, Comoros, Seychelles and Mauritius. Participation in this form of combat was originally limited to young men, allowing elders to judge their physical fitness and strength while providing an opportunity for the youth to gain prestige and test their abilities. Today, while the average age of participants is still between 10 and 35, young people of both genders may practice the sport.

(3) Controversial African roots of Capoeira

While capoeira is largely considered to have been born in Brazil by African slaves, the possibility also exists that capoeira history is older than the arrival of the slaves in Brazil and was already developed by the time they got there. It could be that it was already a part of the culture from one of a number of possible African regions and was brought over with the slaves that began arriving in around 1500 AD.

According to Portuguese scholar Albano de Neves e Souza: “Among the Mucupe in Southern Angola, there is a zebra dance, the n’golo....The n’golo is capoeira.” Brazil as the birthplace for capoeira history is also brought into question by African scholar Dr K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kia, who believes it has its origins in the Congo. He stated in 1993 “Kipura, in the Congo cultural context, is...[enacted by] an individual whose techniques of fight or struggle are based or developed on the ground of rooster’s fighting techniques”.

On the other hand, Professor of Journalism Augusto Ferreira believes capoeira moves were first developed as fighting techniques by runaway

slaves in Brazil in order to defend themselves. Tens of thousands of them escaped forming thousands of hidden societies known as *quilombos* (settlements) and this, according to Ferreira, is where capoeira was developed.

What can be determined is that it is heavily influenced by African cultures. What is more, it has adapted to the needs of the people who have used it throughout the centuries and continues to do so. As the great Mestre Pastinha once said, “Capoeira is capoeira...is capoeira...is capoeira.”

Although capoeira developed in Brazil, it has unmistakably African roots. Nowadays, some groups are currently performing the *brincadeira de angola* in Morocco, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Mozambique, South Africa, Guinea, and Senegal.

3. Capoeira as a postcolonial expression related to African origin

(1) Review of postcolonial theories

Historically, capoeira can be understood as a physical and spiritual expression of slaves, a self-defense martial art against the colonizers. To discuss about the African perspective of capoeira, it is important to understand it in the postcolonial context. Here I will refer to the postcolonial theories of Franz Fanon and also orientalism by Edward Said who criticized eurocentrist theories of how others were designated.

Franz Fanon was born in the French colony of Martinique on July 20, 1925. Fanon learned France’s history as his own, until his high school years when he first encountered the philosophy of negritude, taught to him by Aimé Césaire, Martinique’s other renowned critic of European colonization. Fanon fought with the Free French forces in the waning days of World War II. After the war, he stayed in France to study psychiatry and medicine at university in Lyons. After his studies, he accepted a position as *chef de service* (chief of staff) for the psychiatric ward of the Blida-Joinville hospital in Algeria. Fanon was constantly confronted with his identity as alienated



black and also as colonized. His written works have become central texts in African thought, in large part because of their attention to the roles hybridity can play in forming humanist, anti-colonial cultures. Fanon's first work *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs (Black Skin, White Masks)* was his first effort to articulate a radical anti-racist humanism that adhered neither to assimilation to a white-supremacist mainstream nor to reactionary philosophies of black superiority. While the attention to oppression of colonized peoples that was to dominate his later works was present in this first book, its call for a new understanding of humanity was undertaken from the subject-position of a relatively privileged Martinican citizen of France, in search of his own place in the world as a black man from the French Caribbean, living in France. His later works, notably *L'An Cinq, de la Révolution Algérienne (A Dying Colonialism)* and the much more well-known *Les Damnés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, go beyond a preoccupation with Europe's pretensions to being a universal standard of culture and civilization, in order to take on the struggles and take up the consciousness of the colonized "natives" as they rise up and reclaim simultaneously their lands and their human dignity. It is Fanon's expansive conception of humanity and his decision to craft the moral core of decolonization theory as a commitment to the individual human dignity of each member of populations typically dismissed as "the masses" that stands as his enduring legacy.

Fanon, when asked "What does the Black man want?" relied on Georg Hegel for his answer: the Black man wants to be recognized by the White man. The problem is that the White man and the Black man are caught up in the master/slave relationship that is not mere theory but is an actual psychosis. "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation." Fanon wrote freely and expressively in his first book.

The conqueror has no interest in the culture of the conquered who are considered in need of civilizing. As a result of the civilizing mission,

the mask of imperialism, colonized people have been stripped of their own languages and, without their own culture, they lived with an inferiority complex. The colonized individual is faced with the "superior" culture that dominates her and is "elevated" above "jungle status" only to the extent that she adopts the mother country's standards, from language to learning. Fanon explained "I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." He was quoted as saying "The black man who approaches the white world and attempts to fit in—to learn French, to be educated in France, to live in France—becomes 'white' only to his black friends but remains irredeemably 'black' among white people." Fanon writes of a state called "two dimensions" or "self-division." This self-division is the result of colonialism and subjugation by the colonizer. Fanon insists, however, that the category "white" depends for its stability on its negation, "black." Neither exists without the other, and both come into being at the moment of imperial conquest.

Thinkers around the globe have been profoundly influenced by Fanon's work on anti-black racism and decolonization theory. Kenyan author and decolonization activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also draws on ideas Fanon presents in *Les Damnés*. Inspired mainly by Fanon's meditations on the need to decolonize national consciousness, Ngũgĩ has written of the need to get beyond the "colonization of the mind" that occurs in using the language of imposed powers. Like Fanon, he recognizes that language has a dual character. It colonizes in the sense that power congeals in the history of how language is used (that is, its role in carrying culture). But it can also be adapted to our real-life communication and our "image-forming" projects, which means it also always carries the potential to be the means by which we liberate ourselves.

Edward Said (Edward William Said) was born in Jerusalem on November 1, 1935 as Arab Palestinian. Said was educated in English-language



schools before transferring to the exclusive Northfield Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts in the United States in 1951. He attended Princeton University and Harvard University where he specialized in English literature. He joined the faculty of Columbia University as a lecturer in English in 1963 and in 1967 was promoted to assistant professor of English and comparative literature. Said was promoted to full professor in 1969, received his first of several endowed chairs in 1977, and in 1978 published *Orientalism*, his best-known work and one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th century. In it Said examined Western scholarship of the “Orient,” specifically of the Arab Islamic world (though he was an Arab Christian), and argued that early scholarship by Westerners in that region was biased and projected a false and stereotyped vision of “otherness” on the Islamic world that facilitated and supported Western colonial policy.

Both theories influenced and gave chance to think about not only postcolonialism, but also decolonization.

(2) Postcolonial critics of Black culture outside of Africa

Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* wrote the following: “The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation but also serves as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we haven’t sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.”

This was related to acculturation or deculturation theory of colonized black people under the influence of colonization. Acculturation means cultural modification of an individual, group, or

people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture; or a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. Acculturation also is the process by which a human being acquires the culture of a particular society from infancy. Acculturation explains the process of cultural change and psychological change that results following the meeting of cultures. The effects of acculturation can be seen at multiple levels in both interacting cultures.

Frantz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism* wrote that “The passion with which native intellectuals defend the existence of their national culture may be a source of amazement, but those who condemn this exaggerated passion are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche and their own selves are conveniently sheltered behind a French or German culture which has given full proof of its existence and which is uncontested.” In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues, that “the white master recognized without a struggle the black slave. But the former slave wants to have himself recognized. There is at the basis of Hegelian dialectic an absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted.”

Said directly challenged what Euro-American scholars traditionally referred to as “Orientalism.” Orientalism is an entrenched structure of thought, a pattern of making certain generalizations about the part of the world known as the “East.” As Said puts it: “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”

Orientalism was a book about a particular pattern in western thought. It was not, in and of itself, an evaluation of the importance of that thought. It was written before the peak of the academic “culture wars,” when key words like relativism, pluralism, and multiculturalism would be the order of the day. Said has often been lumped in with relativists and pluralists, but in fact he doesn’t belong there.

In his later literary and cultural work, especially in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said generally avoided the language of confrontation. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking away of



it from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. A native could never aspire to the condition of the white man, the experiences of ruler and ruled were not so easily disentangled.

4. Conclusion

The discussion here is not how do Africans perceive capoeira, rather it is the perception of what Africa is and how it is supposed to be culturally. In the Afro-Brazilian way of thinking, Capoeira as an identity icon, which helps them to identify themselves as having African roots, by maintaining the traditional form, techniques, making them feel close to Africa. Africans always recognize themselves through an outside vision, a vision coming from somewhere else. Capoeira is a perception of African culture, but Africans perceived it as an outside culture. The other point is how Africans see Afro-American, Afro-Latin or Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions, which can be defined as a cultural alienation. The question here is about the relationship between dominator (white colonizers) and dominated (black slaves). As Franz Fanon mentioned in his critiques, the more you are close to white people and their culture, even if you conscientiously deny them, the more you somehow unconsciously include their manner to your way of thinking or habitus. This means that black people who lived and were raised among white people are alienated from an African point of view. The same problems occur even within the ranking of black people being manipulated by white people. As an oppressed person you want to see yourself on top of someone as your so-called master did to you. So by expressing superiority, Africans perceived those cultures, even people with African roots, as a new culture or sub-culture. Especially because they have been introduced to Africa in most cases by European people. Said wrote “Afrocentrism is as flawed as Eurocentrism” meaning that nativism cannot be an effective answer to western hegemony. He said there is no simple way to achieve decolonization. But it also means that,

in many respects, colonialism is still with us. It was through the colonial system that most of the national borders in Africa and Asia were drawn up, in many cases arbitrarily. But more than that are the effects of colonial language, the colonial state bureaucracy, and especially colonial attitudes to things like economic development.

Capoeira, like Latin-American music, is for Africans, even with its African roots, something outside people taught them. As Burkina Faso historian Joseph Ki Zerbo was noting, African history stops moving at the 16th century. The continent suffered from all kinds of humiliation human beings never before experienced. On the one hand, exported slaves conserve those kinds of culture as identity, while on the other hand, exploitation and colonization make Africa ashamed of its own descendents and own culture. Joseph Ki Zerbo was also saying that, after all we were being modeled to receive and consume Western products with their culture, while our products were going to western countries without culture or message. We are just afraid to receive Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Latino, and even Afro-American cultures as African culture, because they were remodeling within a context of cultural alienation.

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