

In Search of You, in Search of Me

When Capoeira Starts to Function

Yoshiko NAGAI Curator and member of Grupo Nzinga

When I visited Salvador in Brazil last year, I met Mestre Janja, the capoeira professor who came to Japan a year before. Not long after we met, she said to me as if she was waiting to say that sentence, 'I remember every detail of Japan so well'. Then she showed me the photos of the trip and talked as if she was revisiting the country. 'You know, I found the same deity as in our religion, Candomblé'. In one of the photos, there was the *cetaka* statue with sword in the quiet temple of Kyoto. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion which contains plural deities with different characters. One of the deities is called Ogun, that of the warrior with an arm. I exactly knew what she meant.

In 2014, the three capoeira professors, Mestre Janja, Mestre Poloca and Mestre Paulinha from the Grupo Nzinga visited Japan. The workshop was held both in Tokyo and Kyoto, and I was involved as one of the organizers. This trip was not only about physical workshops but the importance was in mutually understanding culture.

I myself have trained Capoeira for a few years, and as I continue, I could not help feeling the need to bridge this Brazilian culture of diaspora and my own culture in order to understand it deeper. Capoeira, at a first sight, looks like a martial art of physical beauty. But as you continue to practice, it actually starts to function as a tool for understanding our own culture since many aspects of the art of capoeira touches our cultural instinct as human beings. The lyric of its songs contain the memory of Africa where slaves in Brazil had dreamed of, its movement mimics the walk of animals in the untouched forest, and the sound of music, especially that of Berimbau, vibrates deep inside of our physical sensibility. The motivation for organizing this event, therefore, started with the desire to share with the professors what we have as Japanese culture.

Capoeira originally started as a dance / fighting practice of the slaves forcibly brought from Africa during the colonial period in the 16th century. Africa, since that time, was rich in its diversity of culture and languages. However, the slaves were brutally taken to the unknown land, Brazil, by being separated from their family and cultural roots. This complex background made Capoeira more than a physical enjoyment of people of African origin. It functioned to remember their identity by involving their cultural roots via physical movement, language and music. Knowing these deep historical facts, I cannot help feeling that the nature of this art let us think about where we came from.

The uniqueness of culture could be hidden within a mass of information in this 'global society'. In such a situation, people seem to know better and experience more, however, it is becoming more and more difficult to know about themselves, their own culture and its uniqueness. Also, the lack of human interaction might have accelerated this phenomena. It has become easy, to apparently about a different culture without going and meeting with local people. But what is remarkable about capoeira is that, as Mestre Paulinha mentioned in the symposium during this event, 'it traveled all around the world and inspired various people without any help of authority. It expanded solely with the power of people'.

Mestres of Grupo Nzinga spent entire two weeks observing, asking, speculating about the Japanese culture. Every time I explained about my culture, I felt like I understood better about my own culture. The questions they posed were the answers to my existence. This is when the roda, the circle of the capoeira, has expanded and played in its full meaning.

