

Playing in the street:  
resistance, violence and  
identity in the suburbs of  
Rio de Janeiro

George Howell 2004

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## **Abstract**

The subject of this dissertation is the Brazilian combat game *capoeira*. Capoeira is the totality of a reaction based movement game between two people played to music in a circle of people (called a *roda*). Capoeira was originally a mobilisation of the cultural heritage of enslaved Africans in a Brazilian context. There exists more than one foundation myth about the origins of capoeira. A popular one however, is that capoeira developed as a method of resistance to prepare themselves for an escape from plantation slavery, a set of martial arts practises disguised as a dance, which then developed in the *quilombos*, the maroon communities of escaped slaves. The capoeira practised today is arguably closest to cultural forms called capoeira or *vadiacao* (loafing around) that existed in the *reconcao* (bay) of Bahia and Salvador in the North East of Brazil, although in Rio de Janeiro other influences such as Portugese knife fighting and the *samba duro* (hard samba) have influenced capoeira.

I am interested in the capoeira manifested in the *roda livre* ("free roda") of Caxias, an underprivileged suburban municipality of Rio de Janeiro. The *roda livre* takes place in a street market in the centre of Caxias on Sunday afternoons. The *roda* of Caxias has a sophisticated political ideology of resistance that I will expand upon. The theme of resistance in capoeira is central to my dissertation, I will explore the ways that this specific manifestation of capoeira in Caxias is mobilised as a political and didactic form of resistance.

I conducted fieldwork among the Caxiense capoeirista's in August and September 2003. I used semi-structured interviewing of key informants, and the technique of participant observation which was facilitated by me being a capoeira player for the last seven years. I found DaMatta's insights into Brazilian culture (1991), Freire's Marxean analysis of social relations (1970), and Bourdieu's analysis of capital (1983) particularly useful as tools to understand the *roda livre* and Mestre Russo's teaching.

This discussion of capoeira is specifically related to the capoeira as manifested in the *roda livre*, and the groups of capoeiristas that participate in it. The theories and conclusions of this essay do not apply to capoeira in general, but rather focus on the *roda livre* and associated capoeira groups.

## **Introduction to Capoeira**

In this report I will discuss the Brazilian cultural form capoeira, with relevance to issues of resistance in the Brazilian social setting. Capoeira is a physical game played to music, which has martial, ludic and dance like aspects. Capoeira is a phenomenon in the true sense of the word. In defining capoeira one loses the phenomenological reality of what capoeira is. For this reason Jonas Rabello, known in capoeira circles as Mestre Russo (my main informant, see fig. 1) refers to capoeira as *o cultura* (the culture) so as to encapsulate the phenomenon of capoeira.

*Capoeira is a defence in moments of danger, it is a vehicle for education, an educational didactic, a way of maintaining health, and a kind of therapy.*

*All these elements exist in capoeira. To try to define capoeira in one element you diminish capoeira. Capoeira is "o cultura" because it is hard to define capoeira. Otherwise you fall into the trap of minimising the values that she's got. Capoeira is something that can't be defined, she exists in the moment.*

*Although it is sports practice, capoeira is not just a sport, it is mysterious, there is no clear winner or loser, but there is objective. It is a fountain of life. It has a physical side, but there is no podium for capoeira. Because of its mysterious personality. You always play with, not against. It is always the game itself rather than the individual player.*

The history of capoeira informs us that capoeira has its origins in Africa, and was a tool associated with slave revolts and escapes on the Brazilian plantations. (Capoeira 1995, Dos Santos 1990, Rego 1968). Capoeira legend links capoeira with the *quilombo de Palmares*, a large maroon community made up of escaped slaves in the Serra da Barriga, in the northeastern state of Alagoas, which was organised hierarchically under king *Zumbi*. Palmares physically defied the Brazilian state, resisting numerous armed attempts to conquer it. The association with the *quilombo de Palmares* is also an ideological one, representing African cultural strength and resistance to the state.

The history of capoeira is very open to interpretation, and is highly politicised; different groups read the history of capoeira in different ways. Capoeira in Brazil has been used as a symbol of nationalism, and also a symbol for the black power movement. There exists a discourse about the cultural heritage of capoeira, as to what extent it has its origins in Africa. An emphasis on the cultural contributions of Africans to the Brazilian culture equation can be stressed or diminished depending on the political context in which capoeira is discussed. There are also disputes about the regional origin of capoeira, as there were activities called capoeira in Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and the area of the bay of Bahia and the city of Salvador. The capoeira that is practised today is arguably most akin to the capoeira that was developed in the bay of Bahia and Salvador. Although the capoeira in Rio de Janeiro is also influenced by Portuguese knife fighting and the *capoeira seca* ("dry capoeira", as in without music, and specifically for fighting, developed by Mestre Sinozinho) Lopes 2002).

Capoeira is not just from Bahia however, for example there existed capoeira in Recife, in the NorthEastern state of Pernambuco, where capoeira was linked to the Afro-Brazilian religious festival and dance of *Bumba meu boi*, and became associated with the the dance of *frevô*. In Rio de Janeiro, capoeira famously existed, and was

also known as *batuque* and *pernada carioca* (“Cariocan leg blows”), and *Samba duro* (hard samba). The capoeira froj Rio was also influenced by Portugese *navalhistas*, (knife fighting) and the *malts* (mafia -like gangs made up of capoeira players). The complexity of the hostory of capoeira needs to be emphasised rather than played down, capoeira is a real Brazilian black legacy.

### **Fieldwork Background**

I started practising capoeira in 1996 in London, in 2001 and 2002 I visited Rio de Janeiro for the specific purpose of learning about capoeira. I chose the subject of capoeira for my thesis because it is something that personally interests me. I also felt that being an experienced capoeira player myself, and having researched the subject out of curiosity I am in a position to offer an interesting account of the culture of capoeira. Through learning capoeira I have learned the Portuguese language, which facilitated my work in Rio.

In the summer of 2003 I returned to Rio de Janeiro for six weeks with the explicit purpose of conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my individual project. I chose to study *Mestre Russo’s* group and the *roda livre* of Caxias. Russo is Jonas Rabello’s *apelido* (nickname) in capoeira. Capoeira players are often known to each other only through their nickname. The nickname represents the taking on of the identity of *capoeirista* (one who plays capoeira). I decided to study in this area because I felt that I was privileged to have some intimacy with the master of the *roda*, Mestre Russo, and some of his students. I had participated in the *roda livre* in 2001 and 2002. When visiting London Russo stayed in my house so I was assured of a friendly welcome in the *roda* and at his house. By being privileged to intimately know Russo, and having had already participated in the *roda livre* on separate occasions I felt that I was in a unique position to have access to otherwise inaccessible (inaccessible to me as a white english male) people and culture. Caxias is a suburb of Rio, and where Russo lives is a suburb of Caxias, I only had access to these places because I had friends there, as they are otherwise potentially dangerous for outsiders/foreigners.

I will try to explain my reasonms for feeling that Caxias was inaccessible to me as a white, middle class englishman by describing the area. has a stigma attached to it because of its reputation as the place of origin of infamous *matadores* (killers for hire). Perlman (1976) writes that the men of Caxias often carried guns as a hold-over habit from the north east of Brazil, from where they originally came (49). Perlman aslo writes of Caxias’ food riots in 1962, and its association with *esquadrao’s do morte* (death squads), vigilante groups of potentially corrupt, off duty police men (ibid.). At one point Caxias was even declared an area of national security. Caxias was an area of mass urban migration of people from the northeastern Brazilian

states. It is situated in the Baixada Fluminense, which was at a point around thirty years ago among the fastest growing (in population) areas of the world (Perlman 1976: 97). Considering that the area was also swamp land one gets an indication of the level of poverty of the area.

I'm using the above details to try to explain to the reader the sense of shock that I received from people living in Rio when I told them that I was going to Rio, not just to the tourist friendly south zone, but also to the 'badlands' of Caxias. My only reason for going to Caxias was the capoeira that is manifested there, perhaps this example highlights the social divisions of Rio society, and also the boundary breaking power of capoeira.

During my seven years participating in capoeira rodas and lessons in Europe and in Brazil I was often aware of an absence of political discourse and social agenda. For a phenomenon with such a history of resistance I expected there to be some contemporary political discourse among capoeirista's at capoeira events, but I found it to be significantly lacking. What attracted me to the *roda livre* was the inclusion of a social agenda, and discussion about social issues in the *roda*. The *roda* of the street is also interesting in itself. The atmosphere of a *roda* on the street is different from a *roda* in a capoeira *academia* (academy). It is exciting because of its situation in a liminal place, the open nature of the street *roda* allows an interaction of capoeira players from different schools and backgrounds, offering a diversity and unpredictability not often encountered in capoeira *academias*.

### **A history of capoeira**

During the mid twentieth century (in 1932) capoeira became legalised after a long period of persecution. In Bahia two styles of capoeira developed, *Capoeira Regional* and *Capoeira Angola*. Capoeira Regional was originally called *Luta Regional Baiana* because it was the capoeira that originated in the region of Bahia. Capoeira Angola is called Angola because the Master who was given responsibility to be the emblem of the art, Mestre Pastinha, felt the art felt that capoeira had its origins in Angola's indigenous combative dances. Capoeira Regional developed in the context of inter regional and international martial arts contests in Brazil in the 1930's (Abreu 1999). Previously illegal, the nationalists of Getulio Vargas saw capoeira as having the potential to be a national emblem, and hence legalised it. As to some extent also happened with the samba and carnival, they became symbols of Brazilian nationalism. Mestre Bimba, the creator of capoeira Regional, adapted the existing capoeira. By emphasising the martial aspect of capoeira and utilising techniques from other martial arts, he changed capoeira into a more effective form for fighting

in the ring against other styles of martial arts such as jiu jitsu, judo and no holds barred fighting. It is interesting that Capoeira was legalised as long as it was an obvious fighting competition, rather than a playful, ambiguous activity tied up with African cultural practices. Capoeira Angola developed alongside Regional, but with a traditionalist and contrary dogma. It's primary representative, Mestre Pastinha, "found in the old tradition (of capoeira) some concepts which he made fundamental." (Pires 2002: 77). Unlike Bimba, he was against using physical movements foreign to capoeira (ibid.). The ludic aspects of the game rather than the martial are emphasised along with the use of traditional movements, songs, philosophy and conduct of the ritual of capoeira, all done with respect to the fundamental concepts emphasised by Mestre Pastinha.

Tourism also influenced capoeira's development. As the city of Salvador became a tourist destination, capoeira players realised that they could earn money doing presentations for tourists, this affected capoeira by increasing emphasis on it's acrobatic movement to provide a spectacular show. (see Coutinho 1993: 63).

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

In this essay I hope to raise questions about cultural resistance, and the value of cultural forms in modern societies. I also hope to raise questions about the nature of education and the possibilities of alternative forms of education as didactic tools.

In this essay I shall discuss the ways that Caxiense capoeira offers various types of resistance. What I mean by resistance is not in relevance to previous academic debates about resistance, but is specifically about the ways in which the Caxiense capoeira is an example of resistance to factors such as violence, to a lack of opportunities, and to an encroachment on cultural forms by commercial mass markets.

I will explore the value of capoeira as an educative tool, the themes of capoeira and violence, and the differences between street capoeira and *academia* capoeira. I take the term '*academia* capoeira' as meaning a modernised form of capoeira regional which represents the values of the establishment at the time, the nationalist dictatorship with fascist undertones. I understand that not all capoeira academies reflect these values, but for the purposes of this discourses use *academia* in this somewhat extreme usage. Firstly I will give an ethnographic account of the field setting.

### **An ethnography of the roda livre**

The *roda* (circular space within which capoeira is played) of Caxias known as the *roda livre* (free *roda*, see fig. 1 2 and 3) is conducted under the auspices of *Mestre Russo* (his nickname means 'Russian', it is a synonym of *Sarara*, meaning albino negro), the master of the *roda*. The *roda* of Caxias is conducted with respect to the ritual set up of capoeira Angola, however the *roda* is not a capoeira Angola *roda*, but a free *roda*, where any style of capoeira is allowed. While both capoeira Angola and Regional players frequent the *roda*, there are generally more Angola players than regional players present. The Caxias *roda* takes place in a covered market next to the central bus terminal in Caxias, a working class suburban city on the edge of Rio de Janeiro. The *roda* starts at around one o' clock and finishes at about five o' clock. *Mestre Russo* lives on the outskirts of Caxias, in Parque Sao Jose, which is a twenty minute bus ride from the centre of Caxias. *Mestre Peixe* ("Fish"), *Russo's* oldest companion and student, lives within five minutes walking distance from the covered market, therefore the instruments used to provide the rhythm and melody for capoeira are kept at his house and include a drum, *berimbaus* (one stringed musical bows, amplified through a calabash gourd), tambourines and bells.

The people who make up the core of the *roda* are *Russo*, *Peixe*, and *Russo's* students from the Cosmos project (which I'll discuss later) who form the backbone of the *roda*. Other participants come regularly from all over Rio, and more recently with the globalisation of capoeira, from overseas to learn and participate. Before the *roda* starts *Russo's* younger students organise the instruments, they go to *Peixe's* house to fetch them, bring them back and tune in the *berimbaus*. Once all this has been done *Russo* gives the signal that the participants should move more into the foreground of the market, and the *roda* starts. The *roda* is started with a shout of "Ie" by the master of the *roda* after which a slow song is sung and the *roda* commences; such as:

*Quando eu morre*  
*Eu nao quero grito*  
*Nem misterio*

*Quando eu morrer*  
*Disse Besouro*  
*Nao quero choro*  
*Nem vela*

*Quero um berimbau tocando*  
*Na porta do cemiterio*

*Com um fita amarela  
Oi aiai, gravada com a nome dela*

*Ainda depois do morto  
Besouro cordao de Ouro  
Como e meu nome*

*E Besouro  
Como e qui chamo  
E Besouro*

*Cordao de Ouro*

*E Besouro*

Which translates as:

When I die I don't want shouting or mystery  
When I die said Besouro (literally meaning 'beetle', refers to a legendary capoeira master)  
I don't want crying or candles  
I want a berimbau playing at the door of the cemetery  
With a yellow ribbon with her name written on it  
Still after death Besouro cord of gold.  
What is my name  
E Besouro

In this song the singer is confirming his devotion to capoeira, it is the identity as capoeirista that the singer wants remembered at his funeral. The pathos of this song creates a concentrated atmosphere, preparing the arena for capoeira play, the call and response nature of the song synchronise the concentration of the participants. After this song has been sung the two capoeira players crouching at the feet of the people playing the instruments are signalled by the berimbau player to start their game. They start by exchanging smiles and a handshake, and enter the circle in a ritualised manner with slow movements corresponding to the rhythm of the music and the words of the song. A second type of song is sung once the game has started, typified by a shorter lead and frequent response such as:

*Ave Maria meu Deus nunca viu casa nova cair,  
Mais eu vi casa velha cair  
Nunca vi casa nova cair,  
Ave Maria meu Deus nunca viu casa nova cair,  
Quero ver casa nova cair*

Which translates as:

Ave Maria my God,  
I never saw a new house fall,  
But I've seen old houses fall.  
Ave Maria my God,  
I never saw a new house fall,  
I want to see the new house fall

The words and phrasing of the chorus are interpreted by the players who adjust their interaction with each other in response to the music, a song such as the above encourages a certain reaction from the players: the singer is insinuating that he wants to see one of the players toppled, he is also suggesting that one of the players is the new house and the other the old house, thus the music and song are integral to the game. As the game starts onlookers in the market who are passing by stop and watch it. The participants themselves also form a circle around the two players playing in the middle, and so a space for capoeira is constructed.

The music of capoeira merits its own investigation, as the musicians can influence the way that the game takes place, this adds to the notion of Capoeira as play, because the lead instruments and singer, puppeteer like, affect the way the game is played. If the lead *berimbau* player syncopates and varies the rhythm the players will adjust their movements accordingly, so the *berimbau* player can play with the two players in the *roda*. The singer can also affect play through direct goading with songs with words like "*pege esse nego derruba no chao, esse nego malvado esse nego e um cao*", which means "get the negro and throw him on the floor, this negro is bad, this negro is a dog", or inversely with songs such as "*devagar devagar*", "slowly slowly", used to calm potentially aggressive games.

### **The game of capoeira**

After a few minutes a participant on the *roda* will enter the circle from near the instruments (as a sign of respect), and cut out one of the players to play with the other one. During the game the two players attack, defend and accommodate each others movements, using all the space of the circle to do so.

*A good capoeirista in the roda has to demonstrate his ability to play well. A skilful capoeirista chama atencao (calls attention) while he is playing because of something special that he does, it could be a display of bodily control and acrobatics, like Russo's student Gato Felix, strong, black and in his early twenties, who moves around in variations of handstands and cartwheels, the whole time grinning and bewildering the other player. This continues until the other player makes a mistake - leaves himself vulnerable and Gato manages to sweep his legs. The other player falls on his bottom prompting the laughter of the assembled crowd of participants and observers. Mestre Russo cuts a striking figure with his smart dress, always wearing pressed trousers, leather shoes and a panama hat. Russo is famous for other players out of the roda with powerful kicks, and he invariably demonstrates his capacity to do so. Often during the game he will corner the other player and put his hand in his pocket and pull it out rapidly, pretending that he has a knife, and then proceed to mock gut or slit the throat of the other player, evoking the violence of the maltas, capoeira gangs of old Rio de Janeiro. The moment after he has done this a smile by him will restore the inherent playfulness of the capoeirista. At other times he will distract the other player by removing his hat and then, using the advantage that he has created and will attack with a head butt.*

There are lots of unwritten rules in capoeira relating to players' conduct and movement. Punching and wrestling are not allowed in the roda, strikes from other martial arts are frowned upon. The players should show their respect to each other, and to the musicians and to the Master of the roda; also the players should play to the rhythm that the musicians dictate. The games often last a long time, two players may play for as long as fifteen minutes without stopping. Russo encourages his students to play as often as they can so as to improve their capoeira, (some games last longer than twenty minutes) and also because of the time limitations he and his students have to train capoeira outside the roda. Capoeira games end because a new player has cut one out, or because both decide to finish the game, usually players embrace each other, and exchange smiles. The signal that the roda is going to stop is a song such as "*Adeus Adeus eu vou m'embora*", meaning "good bye good bye I'm going", this song is sung for a variable amount of time, until the roda is stopped abruptly by the shout "Ie" of the master. The roda lasts until around five o'clock when the participants go to a nearby bar to share cold beers, or leave directly. Russo's students catch the bus home while Russo goes straight to his night shift in the city.

### **The non violence of a combat game**

In a study of combat games of Northern Nigeria, Powe (1994) writes about the

origins of combat games in Northern Nigeria's villages. There are controversial discussions within the capoeira community about the amount of direct 'Africanness' in capoeira, I believe that the lack of serious violent movement in capoeira is akin to the pragmatic philosophy of African combat games described by Lowe:

It can safely be assumed that there must have been some form of martial training for youths in the form of games. I say games, because it would hardly do to have a villager kill a relative in a non-war situation, since every man would be needed to defend the village against a common enemy. Furthermore, these games, doubtlessly, had rules to safeguard combatants from severe bodily harm, while at the same time to test the courage and skills of the would-be warriors. (ibid.:6).

In the roda of capoeira attacking movements are rarely carried out to completion if ones opponent does not defend sufficiently. Value is placed on the ability to show the other person that one could have struck them but stopped the movement, in so doing demonstrating superior bodily control to that of the opponent who could not control his body enough to escape the attacking action. If one player's conduct is seen by the other as deserving a strike then he or she may really try to strike the other. If this player then manages to get out of the way of the strike he or she has a moral decision to make, knowing that the other tried to hurt him and having been lucky to have got out of the way, this player can contemplate exacting revenge upon the other player, perhaps by sweeping both legs away from under him. If he attempts to do this and the other player manages to escape from the movement then the tables have turned once more, thus the game of capoeira Angola requires the practitioner to think of the consequences of each of his or her movements. I see this phenomenon in capoeira as demonstrating a form of poetic justice.

Capoeira is also a collaborative exhibition. The two players can co-operate to produce a spectacular game, demonstrating control of their bodies and of the space around them by moving around the space of the roda in acrobatic movements one passing through the axis of the other. This type of game can easily change if one of the players decides to attack the other. The game of capoeira is collaborative and antagonistic at the same time, displaying a liminality between playfulness and seriousness.

From this brief discussion I hope to have demonstrated the psychological nature of the game of capoeira. There is a liminality in the game in the sense that one has to feel whether the other person is playing 'nicely', or whether he really has a malicious intent to do you harm. It is frequent for players to be psychologically and morally

defeated by older players who demonstrate their superior control of space by not letting the other player move at all, while showing him or her that they could have struck them.

Capoeira's playfulness and stress on using one's wits rather than body condition to defeat the other player allows capoeira to be played by both young and old, and men and women on an equal footing. Women participate in capoeira equally with men. A liberating aspect of capoeira for women is that they can defeat men in a physical arena, the aesthetic of capoeira values technique rather than strength, thus allowing women to beat men in public without violent consequences. Although they may be beaten in turn by players with more experience. Value is placed on experience playing capoeira. Older capoeira players, even if physically weaker than younger players often have the upper hand in capoeira because of their accumulated wisdom, and understanding of the psychology of the game.

### ***Malandragem***

A premium is based upon playfully malicious actions in the roda. If one player can psychologically trick the other player he is respected by the capoeira community because of his demonstration of cunning. Deceit in the roda of capoeira is an expression of deceit in the world. By putting expressions of deceit and maliciousness into the arena of play one can laugh at otherwise serious, nasty things. The Brazilian word *malandrage* is an important word for describing the philosophy of capoeira. DaMatta describes *malandrage* as "the Brazilian art of using ambiguity as a tool for living." (1991: 64). The *malandro* (one who survives using *malandrage*) is an important archetypal figure in Brazilian culture, the *malandro* has heroic facets to his character as he often represents the disadvantaged person, who manages to reverse his weak position in social negotiations using just his intelligence to do so (ibid.). An example of *malandrage* in the roda is when one player signals that he wants to end the game and invites the other to shake his hand, at the time that the other player opens up to shake hands the other player kicks him in the chest, or shows him that he could have. The *malandro* plays at pushing the limits of codes of social behaviour, this manifests in capoeira for example as a manipulation of the liminality between seriousness and playfulness. *Malandragem* is a coping strategy of the marginalised to manipulate social relationships to one's advantage. DaMatta(1991) writes that "the basic rule of the street is deceit, deception and roguery (*malandragem*)." (64). Thus it is natural that a roda which takes place on the street would emphasise these qualities.

### **Capoeira and resistance**

Capoeira has always been a resistance movement, contending against the

dehumanising effects of slavery by offering a space for enjoyment and achievement. Capoeira, like some other 'new world' practises which were influenced by slavery place a lot of emphasis on individuality. In a discussion of Caribbean 'Creole culture', Burton, (1997) explores the culture of slavery's effect of increasing an awareness of individuality to counter the dehumanising effects of plantation slavery:

The relentless assault on personal identity...had the effect of encouraging the slaves to cultivate an enhanced appreciation for exactly those most personal human characteristics which differentiate one individual from another perhaps the principle qualities which the masters could not take away from them." (51)

The roda of capoeira, as an institution, has some of its cultural origins in the responses of slaves, to the dehumanisation of slavery. Especially in capoeira Angola, individual expression is highly praised. Capoeira teachers who promote a uniform style of movement among their students are criticised for creating robotic capoeira players. The homogenisation of movement reflects the 'cultural invasion' of capoeira by the oppressor segment of society. What was originally a means of liberation and 'humanisation' in a dehumanising society, has become, through cultural invasion, a sport which does not emphasise personal expression, but rather it stresses learning movements by rote, inculcating a uniform, unvarying activity. It reflects the marketing of capoeira and is a symptom of the penetration of capitalist culture into forms of cultural expression. Bujao, a psychology graduate studying capoeira spoke out at a meeting about capoeira:

*Nowadays there exists a 'capoeira kit'. You can buy capoeira clothes, a belt, a berimbau, and you are a capoeira. It is difficult to find people like Russo. Russo's capoeira is losing, we are losing the real capoeira that comes from the people.*

Russo's capoeira represents a resistance to the penetration of market forces into the culture of capoeira, as Russo teaches for free and manifests capoeira, in the midst of the market crowds with the people, in the street. The more illustrious capoeira *academias* have large amounts of students, and the masters of these groups profit well from capoeira. In the capoeira sense, as a player Russo has as much ability, if not more, than the masters of commercial capoeira groups. Russo's stance is against the market's penetration of capoeira, his economically marginal origins, and his alliance with the capoeira of the street, rather than more lucrative capoeira schools, has left Russo marginalised from the more popularised capoeira. However it conforms his identification with 'resistance capoeira'. Russo advocates a capoeira

that is in keeping with the capoeira of the past to resist market penetration into capoeira, and also to preserve the culture of capoeira intact. He allies his capoeira with *o povo*, which translates as “the people” referring to them as an anonymous mass. DaMatta describes *o povo* as “exploited, plundered, assaulted and unknown, this anonymous mass is called *o povo*.” (DaMatta 1991: 2). Russo is dedicated to the practice of capoeira of the street. The domain of *o povo* is *a rua* (the street).

### **The locale of the roda**

The roda of Caxias takes place in a covered market, near the central bus station in central Caxias. The market is made up of individual traders selling things like copied cd’s, fake t-shirts and sandals, on make shift stalls, or spread out on the floor. On the sides of the market are one or two *lanchonettes*, (snack bars). The market is not particularly busy, but even so the participants of the roda have to negotiate with the market traders for use of the public space. The roda starts when the woman who sells sandals spread out on the floor clears her wares away, allowing the space for the roda, this happens at an agreed time of around one o clock.

Until 2002 the roda took place in the *praca pacificador*, the main square of Caxias, where a busier market takes place. Repeated conflict for space between the capoeira players and market traders, or, for example with an Evangelical woman with a loudspeaker and amplifier who preached in the square every Sunday, eventually forced the roda to move to its new, sanctioned location. Before, the time schedule of the roda was less strictly organised, the roda would start at around ten and finish in the afternoon or continue into the evening if there was enough interest. Now the roda usually starts at one and finishes at around five.

The market place has always been a place for social encounters as well as commercial exchange, going back to the Greek *agora*, and the Roman *forum*. Thus the market has always been embedded in culture (and culture in the market place), recent neo-liberal doctrine privileges the impersonal economic rule of the market macrocosm over social relationships.

Although the roda is ‘free’ in name, it is subjected to restrictions, and now takes place in a municipality sanctioned space, rather than being a more spontaneous occurrence. This is part of a wider phenomenon of the loss of ‘free’ space in modern society, and the domination of culture by the mass market, Polanyi’s account (2001 [1944]) of the ‘disembedding’ of the market from culture is represented in the way that the *roda livre* is marginalised by modernising trends in the market. Russo’s capoeira resists a marginalisation by the street market of Caxias. However, his capoeira is also marginal from the commercialised capoeira, he does not sell his capoeira on the market of commercial capoeira, but rather appropriates a space in

the market for a purely cultural endeavour, by its very presence resisting the disembedding of the market from social life.

### **Capoeira of the street**

*The roda livre has certain objectives:*

*(1) To develop o povo. To develop the people because the people are behind this public art.*

*(2) To meet and unite people of different segments and schools of capoeira, in the noble act of integration, so as to increase the respect for the culture of capoeira in order to achieve growth. (Mestre Russo).*

The roda is a manifestation of capoeira, not for tourists, with the aim of commercial gain, but for the capoeira players themselves, and the people of Caxias. Russo's *roda livre* is a conscious manifestation of unity between people from different social backgrounds. Russo is very keen to promote the roda as neither for one style of capoeira or another, but that it is free roda open to capoeirista's from all styles. Russo sees the divisions between styles of capoeira as a manifestation of cultural oppression, a stratagem of the oppressor classes akin to divide and rule. Thus the roda represents unity between different capoeira styles and capoeira players from all over Rio, and from other parts of the world. The roda of Caxias today represent an international group of like minded people unified by capoeira. Mestre Angolinha refers to the participants of the roda livre as a 'global tribe' of like minded capoeirista's. Capoeira promotes union and a group spirit through the philosophy of the capoeira game, Russo's student Graffiti explained this to me:

*Karate and jiu jitsu are sports, the emphasis is on winning, finalisations, to get onto the medals podium, to be number one. Capoeira doesn't have a number one. Capoeira's goal is group growth. Capoeira is infinite, one always improves but one never gets to be number one.*

Nevertheless, capoeira is a very competitive game, during the game both players are trying as hard as they can to gain an edge over each other and not lose face, all done in a sense of serious play. The ideal is group growth and union, which fits in with Caxiense capoeira's ideology of resistance.

Russo's original reason for dedicating himself to capoeira of the street was because of an ideological clash, between the academy system of capoeira - institutionalised capoeira, and capoeira of the street. In 1973 at the age of fifteen Russo and some

other young capoeirista's made the first of their street rodas in Caxias. At the time Russo was involved with Mestre Barbosa's capoeira academy, which was part of the federation of pugilism of Rio de Janeiro. One of this federation's rules was not to play capoeira in the street. Russo's relationship with Mestre Barbosa became strained and Russo and the others left the academy system to dedicate themselves to capoeira of the street.

Russo describes the the *roda livre* as having an inverse form of organisation to that of the capoeira *academia* and the pugilistic federation, the *roda livre* was presenting capoeira to the people [*o povo*] as the people's own culture. "The revolutionary's role is to liberate, and be liberated with the people." (Freire: 1970: 76). The *academia* system was one patronised by members of state institutions such as the military and the police, when there were graduations of capoeirista's it was done in reference to the Brazilian flag, thus favourable to the government. Through this allegiance *academia* capoeira became accepted.

*Academia capoeira is more accepted. Accepted by intellectuals, people of other nationalities, students, and upper middle class intellectuals.* (Mestre Russo).

The street capoeira did not have the same motives, it owed its allegiance to the culture of capoeira itself, and *o povo*. Russo describes the people one encounters in the street of central Caxias as underprivileged. "In the street the bigger part of the free form of people is illiterate and from an underprivileged social class."

The theories of Paulo Freire are useful for interpreting the resistant aspects of Mestre Russo's *roda livre*. His description of cultural invasion is relevant here:

The invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression. (Freire 1970: 133).

Following Freire's theory, the capoeira of the *academia* is an example of cultural invasion of the oppressor segment of society who control the nature of capoeira practice through systems such as federations. Russo's choice to manifest capoeira on the street was a direct resistance to this control of culture, Russo explained his ideological allegiance to *o povo*:

*We are working with a cultural force, we know the cultural value of capoeira and its strength to develop o povo because capoeira is really their culture. Capoeira is popular*

*culture, she has to be part of o povo. For the people, with the people. In this way we get socio - cultural evolution.*

This philosophy is related to another Freirean principle, that of non - institutional education as a tool to raise the consciousness levels of *o povo*. Freire the educationalist saw education as a means for the people's liberation, he rejects what he calls the banking concept of education, in which the educator fills up the passive student with inert knowledge. Freire prefers a phenomenological approach to education. He advocates educating individuals to realise the power of their own agency, that they are not mere spectators to the world, but have the power to recreate it. "Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory towers, but only in communication." (Freire 1970: 59 [his italics]).

The games of capoeira taking place in the *roda livre* have a power to *chamar atencao* "to call attention". As the *roda* progresses onlookers gather spontaneously to watch the games of Capoeira. The people who come to watch are bus drivers and conductors from the nearby bus terminal, children, old ladies, anyone - it is *o povo* who watch the games of capoeira in the *roda*. During the *roda* Russo frequently pauses the game and the music and proceeds to address the assembled onlookers, (see fig. 4), to communicate with them about capoeira or social issues. During one pause he reflected on the name of the city Caxias. The duke of Caxias after whom the city is named was a war general responsible for genocide in the war against Paraguay. He reflected that he far preferred the old name for Caxias -Santa Maria. Often Russo talk about capoeira, telling the assembled onlookers that this is really their culture, something inalienable to *o povo*. These instances serve as examples of Mestre Russo applying a Freirian educational model, applying concepts discussed above, like using direct communication in the informal, egalitarian site of the street. As an aside, when I questioned Russo if he had ever heard of Freire he said that he had not, but added, "*there is a lot of people like me involved in this resistance, I'm not alone.*" While capoeira in the street and Freirian education may seem disparate, there is a subtle parallel between the dynamic movement and music manifested in the *roda* and some of the principles Freire is advocating. Individuals - *o povao* need to see themselves not as inert and ineffectual, but possessing, like the capoeira players, a dynamic power to recreate the world.

### **The marginalisation of the *roda livre*, *academia* capoeira versus capoeira *de rua***

*In reality we suffered lots of misconceptions. The worst was from capoeirista's themselves, their incomprehension. In the period of the *roda* the academic system*

*treated us like vagabonds, marginals and bandits, we were compared with the worst forms of social life. This prejudice came from the academias.*

As a street capoeira (*capoeira de rua*) player Russo and the other street capoeira members of the *roda livre* suffered discrimination because of their allegiance to capoeira of the street. Russo explained that the *roda livre* had a different agenda to the government sanctioned capoeira academies. The *academia* system had to support an ideology of Brazilian nationalism in the context of the dictatorship, while the street capoeira was dedicated to the popular culture of capoeira itself. The connotations of street capoeira were very negative.

Russo's oldest student Mestre *Peixe* (Master Fish) recounted to me the story of an open *ladainha* (capoeira song) competition held by a large *academia* (Mestre Camisa's capoeira ABADA (Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira) group that took place in Rio's south zone. The Caxias representatives entered the competition and won the competition, their *ladainha* was judged the best. However the prize was not awarded to them because they did not have a capoeira uniform.

Russo today reflects on the irony that the same *academias* who were vehemently opposed to the *roda livre*, and discriminated against its practitioners now want to support the *roda*, because it has become fashionable and its worth has been recognised. On occasion the *roda livre* brings people from other cities in Brazil and even other countries to Caxias just for the purpose of participating in the *roda livre*, the value that people from afar give to the *roda* of Caxias makes the unremarkable town of Caxias a destination for cultural tourism.

*People who were against the free form of capoeira thirty years ago are now for the roda. Now it's seen as cultural resistance and they like it. Now they want to bring Capoeira to the intellectuals. It is wrong, they never were for this, they were against it.*

Although the *roda livre* is ideologically opposed to a state control of capoeira it also seeks sponsorship from the town municipality. Lots of work has gone into making the *roda livre* an acceptable cultural manifestation. The *roda livre* is concerned with cultural resistance, however its opposition to institutions is nuanced by a pragmatic approach to its own survival.

In my approach so far there is a danger that the reader would understand street capoeira as always a valiant and commendable activity. I would like to balance this presentation with the account of *careca* ("baldy", see fig. 7), a street capoeirista from Rio who gave me an interesting account of his experiences as a street capoeira.

careca gave an account of the marginalisation that he and his friends received in the capoeira community from other schools.

*When we went to other academia it would often result in a fight. They would have uniforms, we wouldn't. We had that look about us, other academia didn't like our group. We were marginalised, we were malvistas (bad boys). We were really fast, in the crossing of the street, we spoke little, used lots of slang, in the roda we wouldn't sing.*

careca was subjected to marginalisation because he was a street capoeira player, his account nuances Russo's presentation of street capoeira because careca admits that he and his street capoeira friends were themselves *malvistas*. From his original capoeira group three of his friends were murdered. *"There were ten of us, now there aren't many left. They abused drugs, these things happened."*

Over the thirty years that the roda livre has been going it has become a tradition. Hobsbawn writes that: "invented traditions are those establishing or symbolising social cohesion, or the membership of groups real or artificial communities." (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983: 9). The roda of Caxias symbolises a unity that exists between the participants of the roda. The older participants of the roda impress upon the younger generation, and visitors the importance of maintaining the tradition of the roda of Caxias. This is done by verbally reminding the younger generation of how important they are as carriers of the culture of capoeira, carriers literally of the roda of Caxias. Stories about incidents that happened in the roda where the Caxiense Capoeiristas bravely fought off violent visitors, or the police, amount to a store of legends about the roda livre. The roda becomes a valuable thing to maintain and care for. The history of the roda livre has to some extent become mythologised. Anthropologically what is interesting is that a cultural manifestation that is a kind of performance on the street has achieved the status of a social project/ tradition. When Mestre Russo talks about the roda he talks about it as a resistance movement whose goal is the social evolution of *o povo*, it is partly a challenge to the marginalisation that the participants suffered from the *academias*, it shows that they are involved in a worthy cause. It is also showing a desire to be classed not just as capoeira as a spontaneous disorganised thing, perhaps moving the roda livre away from the type of street capoeira careca's account implies. Rather the roda livre embodies a social project that takes place on the street to be nearer *o povo*, whom they want to enlighten about capoeira because they have the strongest cultural rights to it.

The manifestation of the roda livre is a sophisticated political argument. The ideology of social evolution for *o povo*, and the ideology of unification of capoeiristas

through participation in the roda are Marxean principles. However these principles are not explicit, but somehow implicit undercurrents of the roda livre.

### **Mestre Russo**

*Capoeira gave me a lot of things, I had nine brothers, lost my father at the age of nine and was therefore raised by my mother. We had lots of difficulties and no educational opportunities such as school. I was lucky to have contact with capoeira, it taught me a vocation, didactic oratory strength. Everything came from capoeira, capoeira was my education. I learnt public speaking, Brazilian history, I became a researcher, I went to libraries to learn more. Now I'm even a lecturer. (Mestre Russo).*

Jonas Rabello, known in capoeira circles by his *apelido* (nickname) Mestre Russo is a man whose sole education has been capoeira. Russo decided to dedicate himself to capoeira in a vocational spirit in his early teenage years. He has reached the highest level in capoeira that of Mestre - master of capoeira and is well respected in the capoeira circles of Rio de Janeiro. He is respected not only because of his dextrous physical capabilities but because of his sophisticated understanding of the nature of capoeira. Russo, has become an 'organic intellectual', his education has been solely cultural and is an example of the potential successes of cultural education, as advocated by Freire. Other capoeiristas have also become organic intellectuals, notable examples are Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Moraes.

Russo lives with his wife and two sons in a small two room plus kitchen and toilet dwelling space which is as much a shed as a house (see fig. 5). He is constructing a larger, more stable house next to his present dwelling, but cannot complete it because of a lack of money to do so. Russo is a night-watchman and has worked regularly since he started his family. He explained the difficulties of his situation:

*I earn R\$502 per month. It maintains the family badly, it is not a good remuneration, to educate two children , buy food and other things, we have to be very economical. With this amount of income it is hard to construct a house, and we have to live in subhuman conditions. It is the minimum wage.*

502 reals is not very much money at all, bearing in mind that the exchange rate between pounds and reals is very much in the pounds favour, this sum translates as less than 100 pounds per month. Mestre Russo is part of Rio de Janeiro's anonymous marginalised suburban mass who commute to the city to work long hours for low pay. Russo was in the past, and to an extent still is culturally marginalised by the

capoeira community because of his dedication to capoeira of the street especially during times when capoeira of the street was seen as a marginal activity.

### **Mestre Russo's symbolic capital**

While the economic reality of Russo's life is one of disenfranchisement, his devotion to capoeira endows him with a wealth of symbolic capital. Johnson (1983) describes Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as "the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour that is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)."<sup>7</sup> Russo's symbolic cultural capital does not give him material gains, but it gives him the intangible rewards of prestige, admiration and respect from the capoeira community. Bourdieu believed that economic capital should not be superior to other forms of capital such as symbolic capital or cultural capital, rather it should be seen as one among other fields of capital (*ibid.*:8).

Mestre Russo who has invested his time into the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital is still economically poor. I see Russo's choice of dedicating himself to capoeira vocationally as one of necessity as well as choice. Perhaps it is because he has always been economically marginal, lacking in economic capital that he decided to dedicate himself to the pursuit of symbolic and cultural capital. *careca*, a capoeirista who has known Russo for a long time offers an insight into Russo's marginal position. "*Mestre Russo had lots of problems. He had problems with money. As he had no official documents he used to get into trouble with the authorities.*" Thus capoeira offers an alternative sphere for the accumulation of capital that offers an amount of liberation from the dominance of the prevalent ideology which privileges economic capital. Russo passes on his cultural capital to local youths in his neighbourhood for free, expecting dedication in return.

### **Authority versus power**

Russo is an authority figure in the street in the sense that assembled onlookers listen to him. He is listened to because of his symbolic capital as a true capoeira master, which grants him authority. Skalnik (1999) writes that power and authority are fundamentally opposed issues. "While authority is gained by free public support and works by role or consensus power is a result of the use or threat of physical force and operates without recourse to the peoples wishes."<sup>164</sup> Mestre Russo is a character who has authority, he is listened to and respected by the people on the street, yet as a suburban commuter he has very little power even in relation to his own life. Russo teaches capoeira to his students for free, economically disempowering himself, he becomes an authority figure by sacrificing his own

economic gain from capoeira, instead he is respected as a protector of culture, rather than one who profits economically from culture. The roda livre offers Russo a space to demonstrate the ability to be self aware and increase the self awareness of others.

### **Group Cosmos**

*Cosmos is synonymous with the universe of capoeira. In reality it is a work to respect differences. In capoeira there are different versions of the same thing that maintain opposition to each other. Cosmos' objective is to integrate people. In reality it is all the versions together that form the thing that is capoeira. (Mestre Russo).*

Russo teaches capoeira for free in the yard outside his house in Parque Sao Jose, which is about a fifteen minute bus ride from the centre of Caxias. He has formed a small, cohesive group of young capoeiristas in a project that he has called 'Cosmos Capoeira'. The name Cosmos was chosen in line with Russo's sophisticated understanding of the culture of capoeira.

The group has a design which is emblazoned on t-shirts that members of the project wear to show membership to the group (see fig. 6). Russo explained the symbolism of the logo to me:

*The superior star represents birth, the tail of the comet represents life, thus there is birth, growing up, death and reincarnation. Within the circle is a black part, which represents life's difficulties, in the middle there is a star, which represents the point in our life, man lives by following his objectives. In reality people are prepared for adversity. People associated with this group are prepared for adversity. They have to be prepared to overcome difficulties and confront adversity.*

There exists a group motto: *"The worst fall of man is to run from his difficulties, when he proceeds in this manner he is defeating himself."*

The philosophy of Mestre Russo is embodied in the groups name, motto and logo. The symbolism of the logo and the motto of the group are examples of the pedagogy of Mestre Russo. He is passing on to his students a philosophy that will benefit them in their lives. Russo's capoeira teaching gives his students a moral education. One of his students, twenty year old *Africano* told me one Sunday after the roda livre: *"If it wasn't for capoeira I don't know if I'd still be alive today."* Russo's students gain a sense of belonging and a sense of personal worth by practising capoeira. Capoeira and the roda livre give Russo's students a profound love for the culture of capoeira that makes them value their own lives as part of the culture of

capoeira. I asked Russo how he thought that capoeira was helping his students.

*You can see the recompensataion, the respect that they have in the community, the posture that they maintain, a love very developed, better ways of expression. These things can be perceived. They have gained an objective.*

Russo's students *Graffiti*, *Urso* (Bear), *Africano* (African) and *Gato Felix* (Felix the Cat), are the core of group Cosmos. All are in their early twenties and are dedicated to capoeira. They have to balance their desire to constantly be involved with capoeira training with social responsibilities of work and children. Gato has one child, Africano at the time of fieldwork had one child and a pregnant girlfriend, and Urso has two children. In the unforgiving social climate of Rio Russo's students have little time to spend training capoeira because they have to go out and earn money to support their families. Graffiti works in customer services for a company in the south zone Rio, Urso works as a minibus driver's assistant, Africano was a soldier until he was made redundant. He now sells snacks outside Rio's football stadium the *Maracana*, Gato Felix is in the army. Due to these pressures the *roda livre* becomes their main training area. Russo encourages them to play for a long time in the *roda* as a way of practising capoeira, perhaps also liberating themselves from the pressures of daily life.

Group Cosmos was formed specifically to articulate with the *roda livre*, to provide a new generation of capoeira players to inherit the responsibility of maintaining the *roda livre*. The pressure of responsibility for the continuation of the *roda livre*, and a feeling of privileged inheritance of a cultural form, which is done by the older participants in the *roda's* emphasis on, and retelling of the *roda's* history gives Russo's students a feeling of self importance and a broad sense of community. The sense of belonging that capoeira offers Russo's teaching can be seen as both a resistance to the dullness of suburban life and the necessity to work and commute long hours for poor remuneration.

### **Capoeira and social mobility**

*Capoeira helps to open ones mind, one goes to the zona sul, we used to go to the zona sul just for the beach, capoeira has helped me to get to know people in the zona sul, it has changed my vision. They get to learn that there are good people in the Baixada, who are educated we show that we are educated aswell in capoeira. Before capoeira I thought that people in the zona sul would not be ligada pra gente [switched on to us], that they would classify us as rubbish, that they wouldn't like people from the Baixada because they make their judgements based on*

money. (Gato Felix)

Rio de Janeiro's social divisions are formed along clear geographical lines. The *zona sul* is the relatively small part of Rio and is close to Rio's famous beaches of Ipanema and Copacabana. It is where the majority of the privileged classes live and where tourists visit, it has much more amenities and infrastructure than other parts of Rio. The *zona norte* is a much poorer and larger area of the city, the *Baixada Fluminense* is further out from the *zona norte* and is equally, if not more underprivileged than the *zona norte*. Russo informed me that the district of Caxias is the most underprivileged of all Rio de Janeiro state. There is to some extent a colour issue as well, out of Russo's core group of students only one of them is not black, Gato explained that he felt discriminated against because of his colour when in Rio's south zone.

Russo's student Gato Felix explained to me that through practising capoeira he has attended capoeira rodas in different parts of Rio de Janeiro, and that this experience has broadened his horizons. Capoeira offers a degree of social mixing to its practitioners that crosses the socio-geographical frontiers of Rio society. Mestre Baba (a participant of the *roda livre*) said that what he believes to be one of capoeira's greatest strengths is that "*capoeira oscillates people of different social levels, it offers a grande aproximacao* [A big nearness-ization]." He went on to say that "*we have already crossed frontiers that in the past were deemed impassable.*" The frontiers Baba is talking about are the social and racial barriers of *Carioca* society. On a global scale, it is this very *aproximacao* that is potentially exported with conscious forms of capoeira.

Perlman (1976) writes that "the closed nature of Latin American class structure makes social mobility difficult to achieve." (ibid.:243). Capoeira is resistant to this closed class structure because it provides a type of "social oscillation" as outlined above. By the visiting of different rodas in different locales, preconceptions are challenged. Gato Felix explained that "*In capoeira we realise that we are all equal, the Baixada, the zona sul, even outside Brazil.*"

Roberto DaMatta explains the metaphorical sense of the Brazilian word for play - *brincar*. "*Brincar* may also mean to 'enter into a relationship' by breaking down the barrier between social positions, to create an atmosphere of unreality and to superimpose it onto real life." (1991: 109). Through playing capoeira different segments of society can play with each other, allowing social mobility.

The experience of capoeira revolves around playing, and has an egalitarian ideology, with a hierarchy based around comparative merit and skill of the individual capoeiristas, race and economic capital do not apply to the hierarchy of capoeira. A visible hierarchy among capoeira players at Capoeira rodas may seem at odds with the egalitarian ideology of capoeira I describe. DaMatta explains that the

juxtaposition of hierarchy and equality is not necessarily a contradiction in his description of the Brazilian *carnaval*: “From a hierarchical language and style, we pass to a competitive and egalitarian code, since now open contests provide an opportunity for all.” (ibid.:112). This is in keeping with the socialist ideology of the *roda livre*.

### **Capoeira as a *braco forte***

The well armed drugs gangs of Rio de Janeiro’s *favela*’s and suburbs employ young people as employees in their organisations. For children growing up in marginalised areas of Rio the temptation to join the drug gangs is very strong, because the drugs gangs offer status and power and access to lifestyle commodities otherwise unavailable. Mestre *Baba*, a participant of the *roda livre*, describes his personal experience of the problem of the drug gangs.

*My own son at the age of thirteen was undergoing the problem of being attracted by the trafficantes, who were at the school gates everyday. Offering him money, hamburgers, Nike trainers. Capoeira can be a braco forte (strong arm) against this, it offers security, and union.*

The child that is born at the margins of society is faced with having to work in drug traffic. It is the only effective way that he has to get out of misery. (Tulio Viana in Mogensen 23/03/2004 [www.coav.co.br/publique](http://www.coav.co.br/publique)).

Recent research has shown that the reasons children enter drug traffic is because of the growing consumer culture. Children with no means to buy fashionable commodities enter into drug gangs so as to gain the status associated with consumer products (Dowdney 2003). Capoeira, taught conscientiously, as in the mode of Mestre Russo offers the merits of symbolic and cultural capital. Power and status can be gained in an alternative to that gained by involvement in drug gangs, and the lure of fashionable consumer items.

Mestre Manoel a veteran of the *roda livre* teaches in some of Rio’s large *favelas*. Manoel explained that he uses capoeira as a means to educate children about issues such as history and drug trafficking. He also morally educates the children morally, teaching them to respect their parents and relatives, something that state education does not do.

*We use capoeira to educate children, to speak about the drug traffic. Music can be used to deal with the theme of violence in school. Teachers don’t have the skills to deal with*

*these problems. For example one kid called a darker kid macaco [monkey], hence he didn't want to go to school. Teachers aren't prepared to deal with this situation. Capoeira can help sort out these sort of situations. Our work in Mare favela is about teaching children identity.*

Manoel's work is about teaching children in the favela personal identity and self worth. Tulio Vianna feels that the answer to the problem of adolescents in conflict with the law is education. "If they had a perspective on life, no matter how small, they could think twice." (Tulio Viana in Mogensen 23/03/2004 [www.coav.co.br/publique](http://www.coav.co.br/publique)). Capoeira can offer youths this "life perspective", the following interview with Marcelo, a 19 year old student of Manoel demonstrates the positive educational force of capoeira.

*I started capoeira in Caxias with Manoel, at 12. This made me stop doing lots of wrong things, and I changed a lot. I was always an agitated kid, thanks to capoeira I became more controlled and more conscious of culture. I also went back to studying. ([www.vivafavela.com.br/publique](http://www.vivafavela.com.br/publique) 26/03/04).*

Involvement in capoeira offers the marginalised groups of Rio society an escape from the difficulties of daily life through play, Turner elucidates this point: "during play a disengagement from reality is achieved, freeing the practitioner from a mundane existence. In this very capacity play inheres its social value." (Turner 1983: 29). The practice of capoeira is also a lifestyle choice for more privileged sectors of society, as the marginalised youth turn to brand name trainers to achieve status and respect, the privileged classes turn to capoeira Angola as a way of achieving respect irrespective of wealth, through the acquisition of symbolic capital.

The Turners write that "in *communitas* there is a total direct confrontation of human identities which is rather more than the casual camaraderie of ordinary social life." (Victor and Edith Turner *ibid.*:204). The *communitas* that the capoeira group offers serves to allow social mobility, and allows an alternative sphere for authority and respect. The *communitas* of capoeira also can serve to protect youths and children from the lure of organised violence. Capoeira's quality as an alternative sphere for authority and respect makes capoeira dangerous for 'the system' because it subverts norms of respect and authority. This is a potentially revolutionary quality of capoeira.

## **Capoeira and the *bailes funk***

*Gato Felix* told me that before he started training capoeira with Russo he and his friends would go to *Bailes funk* (funk balls) for the purpose of fighting. *Baile funks* are spontaneous underground hip hop style parties, the movement *Funk carioca* originated in the north zone and Baixada Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro. Sometimes the dance floor is divided into two sides with a 'corridor' in the middle where two sides swap punches and kicks. "The DJ commands the fight, he plays a music to initiate a fight, and later plays another one to calm it down." (www.tranzine.democlub). The *baile funk* is an aggressive pastime for the youths of the lower classes. Russo's students Graffiti, Gato, and Africano, all aged around twenty one described the *bailes* that they used to go to as fun, but very dangerous. They told me that if you go there and fall over it can be deadly because the mob will kick and stamp on you. They classified going to *bailes* for fighting as a negative pastime in comparison with capoeira. The bad reputation of the funk club is also due to the *bailes* being used by drug gangs as opportunities to sell drugs, and is associated with prostitution.

Gato Felix said that after he and his friends started to train capoeira with Russo they stopped going to the *bailes funks* with the expressed purpose of fighting. Gato and Russo's other students classified the *baile funk* where fighting is permitted as violent and dangerous, whereas capoeira is not, capoeira is a counter violent catharsis for aggression, whereas *baile funk* fight clubs offer a violent catharsis for aggression. Russo's capoeira roda offers an alternative, safer combative arena to that of the *baile funk*.

### **The roda livre as counter violent**

*We're not violent, the roda is not violent, our capoeira is combative, it is not violent.*

This was Mestre Russo's response to my naive suggestion that the roda livre had certain violent aspects to it. It was his strong reaction and opposition to let the roda or Caxiense capoeira be classified as violent that led me to probe this topic deeper. It may be because the Caxiense capoeira and roda is a resistance against violence on so many levels that Russo reacted so strongly to my thinking that the roda or capoeira as taught by him was violent. It could also be that the connotations of 'violence' are stronger in Rio than in London, they take on a deeper meaning in a city with such serious problems of social inequality, in Rio violence is associated with unprovoked police brutality, and gun battles between drug gangs and the police, (Minayo: 1999) rather than giving and receiving blows in the roda.

Mestre Russo's opposition to the idea that the roda livre is violent could also be a

result of his repeated discrimination and marginalisation because of his dedication capoeira *de rua*. A negative portrayal of street capoeira as violent goes against his philosophy that street capoeira is a manifestation of cultural resistance.

### **First Impressions of the roda livre**

When I first visited the roda livre on a hot day in 2001 I was intimidated by the intense exchanges of potentially lethal blows between the participants. It looked to me like Russo was really trying to kick his students out of the roda, or kick them in the face, and that they were escaping the movements by the skins of their teeth. The games between the younger participants were also very competitive. The two players were using every sneaky trick to sweep the other ones legs away to make them fall defencelessly on the floor. During these exchanges the players were often laughing and grinning at each other. Gato Felix commented to me that he once overheard a passer by observing the roda say "*The only way to stop these guys if they were to attack is with guns.*" Thus the capoeiristas demonstrate a potential for violent movement, and an ability to get out of the way of violent attacks, a general sense of ease in the thick of conflict is achieved by the better capoeira players. I remember being too afraid to enter the roda because of the fear that I would get hurt. When I did finally enter the roda I was almost immediately tripped up and sprained an ankle in the process.

The roda livre is conducted in a way that one has to put oneself into the arena to play, one needs a high degree of confidence in one's own ability to play capoeira well, otherwise one is too intimidated to enter. The balance between combativeness and playfulness changes from moment to moment, there is enough potential danger for one to feel that one has tested oneself, and enough play to feel a friendly bond between participants.

### **The roda of Caxias' violent past**

In the past though very violent things have happened in the roda of Caxias. Mestre Russo has been stabbed in the chest during a game by a disruptive visiting capoeira player, and pistols have been pulled from belts and aimed in the roda. Capoeira players used to come in groups to the roda's of Caxias to try to stop it from happening. In the seventies and eighties there was a lot of discrimination against street capoeira as the general mode of capoeira was being institutionalised. Russo told me that the roda livre was attacked because of its ideology. The *academia* was allied to the government, while the street roda was allied with the culture and the people. This ideological clash led to confrontations in the roda livre between capoeira players from capoeira academies and the capoeira *de rua*. The roda livre of

Caxias facilitated these confrontations because it took place in the free space of the street, which allowed other capoeira groups access because it was in the public domain, not the private domain of the capoeira academy. The Caxiense capoeiristas' decision to devote themselves to capoeira of the street was done at a time when this was completely against the general mode of Capoeira. They were discriminated against and attacked because of their refusal to conform to the institutional version of capoeira.

### **Maldade in the roda livre**

DaMatta writes that in Brazil *a rua* (the street) represents “the harsh reality of life’ *a duro realidade da vida*” (1991: 67). The *roda livre* takes place on the street. The *roda* is not violent, but integral to it are negative emotions such as deceit and wickedness. The ‘harsh reality of life’ is internalised by the *roda*. A theatrical, or playful presentation of negative emotions such as violence offers the participants and observers the chance to laugh at otherwise serious, sad things.

Although this is a great generalisation, the local participants of the *roda* are from a certain socio-economic background which needs to use strategies of cunning to survive. The fact that the *roda* takes place on the street, adds up to create a certain dynamic in the way games of capoeira are conducted. One of the newer generation of capoeira participants of the *roda livre*, *Binio*, the son of Mestre Angolinha, describes the *roda* of Caxias like this:

*The capoeira in Caxias is a spontaneous thing, where people divert themselves, but it also has a lot of maldade, the roda of Caxias is like a lesson every Sunday. Every Sunday you go through a different life experience.*

*Maldade* can be translated as badness, a propensity to do bad things, *Binio* does not see this in a negative way, rather he sees it as a positive thing in that one learns more about the propensity for evil within people in life in general, which helps to resist the violence of day to day life. *Graffiti*, a student of Russo, told me that:

*Capoeira players do have bad intentions [maldade], it is a characteristic of the capoeira player in the moment of the game. However one looks for the combative rather than the violent in capoeira.*

### **The roda livre as a cathartic arena**

The *roda* of Capoeira serves as an arena to let out aggressive feelings in a controlled environment. An informant in Linger’s (1992) ethnography of feuds in Sao Luis

explains the social reasons for violent confrontation:

What a fucked up life [*que vida fudida*] this is, you leave home at 6 a. m., take the bus, full of people, after a day of working in the bank, in the factory, people summoning you, the inspector calling you, chewing you out [*dando pito*], and for what? For something that's not going to give you any profit, that you're not even going to use. And so a guy like this, us, I don't exclude myself, because I also feel myself sort of expelling [*botando pra fora*] this. We've got to expel, if not we'll die of a heart attack. So this is it, the basic stuff [*materia prima*] of brigas, of conflicts. (cited in Linger 1992: 127-8).

Linger writes that "Brazilian social relationships generate intrapsychic quandaries revolving around the issues of self respect and aggression." (ibid.:238). Lingers' ethnography offers rational explanations of the reasons for violent confrontation in Sao Luis.

At that moment [on the bus with the conductor] I didn't want to know about any of this, I really vomited, I vomited all those problems that I was having, and when I hopped off the bus I was a very happy guy. (ibid.: 123).

Expelling aggressive feelings has been compared to vomiting by Mestre Russo, who told me "*when the soul feels bad one has to vomit it out, to clean ones sentiment.*"

The same cathartic effect as described by Lingers informant is achieved through playing capoeira. In the arena of the capoeira roda where both participants are somewhat prepared for potential physical confrontation, capoeira emphasises self control, and not descending into uncontrolled violent disputes. This allows aggressive feelings to be mutually exorcised without descending into a fight. However the element of danger is still present in capoeira, since *maldade* is part of the game of capoeira. Capoeira is not a strictly peaceful activity, it can be aggressive and people do get hurt. *Pau*, meaning "wood" is the expression for a hit in capoeira, one can *dar um pau*, "give a wood or use the expression *o pau comer*," "the wood ate". Aggression tendencies come out in the roda as physical blows, however this is but one facet of the game of capoeira, the competition of capoeira is a very subjective phenomena, as is the morality of the capoeira roda, especially in the street. Although the ideology behind the roda livre is one of progressive social inclusion and mixing, the exchanges that take place within the roda can be dangerous, as Russo says, one has to vomit out one's bad feelings, one's frustrations with daily life, the roda offers an arena to do so. However, Russo does not see this as a manifestation of violence:

*When playing one has to be calm, laugh, smile, see the good humour - real good humour, capoeira is not violent. Violence is in the soul, not in the point of the foot.*

The morally ambiguous nature of capoeira play gives capoeira its power to encompass differences between people. The subjective nature of the roda allows people with different viewpoints, life experiences, and backgrounds to participate together. The premium placed on individuality, and breadth given for individual expressions of playing capoeira give the roda livre a certain diversity. Its moral ambivalence allows people from different classes to interact together in an unpatronising, mutually respectful way. Social relationships are not over idealised, all is not necessarily peaceful, conflicts do occur and people do hurt themselves playing capoeira. The refusal to offer a patronising portrait of social relations gives capoeira its value as an enlightening catharsis, it gives the capoeira player an inherent understanding of violence.

*The capoeira roda is counter violent, we learn not to be violent, to take violence into a dialogue and resolve it in other ways, we learn to dominate the anger within people.*  
(Gato Felix).

At the same time movements such as Russo's throat slitting mime hints at a violence of the past. A nostalgic recollection of the gross potential for violence without actually doing it helps make the important transition from reality into fiction, or life into art, which allows the catharsis of violent action without actually carrying it out.

## **Conclusion**

Russo's capoeira offers an ideological resistance to the dominant mode of market influenced capoeira. It resists the cultural invasion of capoeira by allying itself firmly with *o povo*, and *o rua* of central Caxias, refusing to be separate from the people in the street. The roda livre takes place in the street market of central Caxias, metaphorically it is a culture embedded in the market, *junto com o povo* ("together with the people"), it forcibly resists, to borrow Polanyi's expression (2001[1944]), the 'disembedding' of the people's culture from the people themselves.

This form of capoeira that consciously resists the market, and which has a somewhat socialist ideology sets a good example to disenfranchised youths. It gives an example of a community that places value not on consumer goods, but on symbolic and cultural capital, resisting the needs proscribed by well marketed

advertising, which tempts them into involvement with drug gangs.

The inter group *communitas* of capoeira allows a social mobility useful for crossing ethnocentric class barriers. It offers a social identity based on cultural capital. Capoeira's '*grande proximacao*' is a resistance to the divisions set by Rio's geographically aligned class barriers, offering social interaction among people from different social strata, with the specific aim of greater unity between them. The *communitas* of capoeira offers an escape, a sense of belonging and an identity that resists the dehumanising effects of having to work in the lowest rungs of the global neoliberal economic system, and the consequences of gross inequality on normal social life. The sense of belonging and identity (self worth) gained in capoeira serves as a buffer to the empty values and false needs of consumerism. The social mobility that becomes available to the accomplished capoeira player also depends on whether the individual has links with a larger capoeira organisation, some graduates of the *roda livre* have gone on to become international capoeira teachers, famous within the capoeira community (players such as Cobra Mansa, Angolinha, Jurandir for example), other capoeira players who do not have media friendly outlooks or names (such as Russo), are marginalised from the opportunities that exist. I want to avoid a presentation of the *roda livre* as a stepping stone for social mobility. It provides a degree of social mixing, and a training ground to become a very accomplished capoeira player. Russo's loyalty to *o povo* has limited his money making potential. To some extent Russo represents an archetypical social actor, that of the self sacrifice for a cause. As an organic intellectual Russo shows the levels of sophistication that can result from a solely cultural education, proving the worth of Freirian educational approaches.

The *roda livre* offers an arena for physical confrontation, as an alternative to violence, by offering it's participants a sphere of combative confrontation in which to gain the catharsis of physical confrontation, without the social consequences of 'real' fighting.

Playing in the *roda livre* gives practitioners lessons that can be applied to the struggle of daily life. Through an understanding of capoeira a discourse on violence is made possible through the use of allegory and metaphor of what happens in the game, in the *roda*, and real life. *Conscientizacao* (conscious-isation) is achieved through involvement in the *roda livre*, as a participant and as an observer, with the goal of social evolution.

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Russo, Peixe and Rojerio in the roda livre in the 1970's