

## HISTORY

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### Profiles of practitioners of Capoeira fight during the the centuries XIX and XX

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#### Introduction

This essay comes from a monograph whose first object was the identification of profiles of contemporary practitioners of the fight/game of Capoeira in the centre of Portugal. The second object of the monograph – but not less important – was the identification of profiles of Capoeira practitioners from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that the two sets of profiles could be compared and the changes could be identified, especially in the continental area of Portugal. Based on that, we carried out an analysis of the profiles of Capoeira practitioners from the three Brazilian historical periods – i.e., colonial, imperial and republican periods – admitting that this anthropological approach is implicit in the context of the Brazilian fight. It is worth mentioning that the period concerned lasts around two hundred years.

Because Capoeira is one of the fights/games that have been most widely adopted in the world, meaning it has become globalised in all its variants, it is necessary to carry out analytical studies of several documents and particularly of the related literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to achieve a better knowledge of its inherent characteristics. So far, such characteristics have been highlighted by researches conducted by scholars from many countries around the world. However, those studies have not provided any analysis of the physical, social and psychological profiles of Capoeira practitioners, and this is exactly where the importance of this paper lies.

Throughout Brazilian history, the term *Capoeira* has not been used in a single way. However, by carrying out a careful and accurate documentary

and bibliographical research, we can not only identify these meanings but also compare them. Interestingly enough, Araújo [1997] states that “many names have been assigned to this physical practice, as well as to the ones who practised it or used it for recreational or self-defence purposes” (p. 98). In addition to referring to the fight/game, the word *capoeira* was used to define a Capoeira practitioner, on the one hand, and a sort of thug, on the other hand. It is also important to note that “this fight/game was historically recognised under the name of Capoeira only in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, many years after the aforementioned sort of thug had been given the same name.

The word *capoeirista*, in its turn, started to be applied to practitioners of the game/fight of Capoeira only in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the state of Bahia. We should note that this word is not used in this paper to refer to any of the profiles assigned to any individual in any historical period.

#### 1. Historical background

The origin of Capoeira has been a controversial subject because of the lack of documents or scientific studies that could categorically confirm or refute any of the statements on this theme, “whether regarding its influences, its appearance in Brazilian territory, or even its existence in Africa” [Araújo, Jaqueira 2006, p. 5].

According to Araújo and Jaqueira [2006], when we talk about the origin of Capoeira, we should take into account two perspectives: a macro one and a micro one. Concerning the macro perspective, the authors carried out a survey of the related literature

and presented all the views on this theme. One of these views claims that Capoeira was created by black people and/or is derived from an African practice, thus being an invention of Africans in Brazil. However, the authors came to the conclusion that studies reporting the influence of an African practice lack scientific foundation. Consequently, they feel inclined to admit that Capoeira originated in Brazil as the result of a confluence of cultures.

Based on the mixed nature of Capoeira and on the resulting relationships amongst individuals from different cultures, this analysis of profiles proves to be pertinent to demystify the exclusive Black influence both on the creation and the development of Capoeira in Brazil.

Araújo and Jaqueira [2006] also identified authors who argue that the Brazilian fight originated from Brazilian Amerindians, but such claim has not been supported by any scientific evidence.

As for the micro perspective, Araújo and Jaqueira [2006], “based on the assumption that Capoeira came out of many different cultures within a historical period in Brazil and is therefore Brazilian” (p. 9), presented a way to provide a geographical delimitation of the origin of Capoeira in Brazilian territory, focusing on the survey of information related to the presence of Capoeira in the states of Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco and São Paulo. This choice was based on the fact that these states have produced a significant amount of documents on Capoeira and have become large population centres with a major role in the spread and transformation of Capoeira along the time.

Considering both the literature produced by folklorists and oral tradition itself, Araújo and Jaqueira [2006] argue that Capoeira originated in the state of Bahia, specifically in the city of Salvador. However, this argument has been contested by some groups of scholars who claim Capoeira originated in Rio Janeiro. In summary, Araújo and Jaqueira [2006] conclude that there is no ultimate proof for any of the states concerned to be considered the place of origin of Capoeira, albeit the strength of the oral tradition in favour of the state of Bahia.

## 2. Historical profile of capoeiras

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

Analysing both the process whereby Brazil became a country and the population groups that make it a plural and mixed nation, without ignoring its particular social and economic conditions, we consider that the social, physical and psychological profiles of Capoeira practitioners are not much

different, even though we recognise little differences in some of the aforementioned states.

As we start to deal with the main theme of this essay, it becomes necessary to establish the conceptual boundaries of the approach used herein by understanding first the exact meaning of the term *profile* and then the characteristics related to it, as well as how to identify such characteristics.

*Profile* is used here in the sense of *expression of all the features, aspects, characteristics, characters or moods associated with a person or set of persons which came out in a specific place or time under some favourable conditions*. Based on this conceptual framework, we understand that the Brazilian historical periods provided all the necessary conditions for different profiles of Capoeira practitioners to come out and spread along the country.

We consider the **physical profile** to be “all the set of characteristics of a Capoeira practitioner that are exclusively related to the body”.

In view of the fact that human beings need to live in society and that this society is ruled by specific norms applied within a particular historical period, we define the **social profile** of Capoeira practitioners as “all social evidence, expressed by individuals, against or not the established norms and associated with different contexts and its own forms of occupation”.

Still regarding the social profile of Capoeira practitioners, we venture into the presentation of the *collective-individual* dichotomy. The *collective social profile* can be understood as *all social evidence of an individual as an element belonging to a particular social group*, which in this context has been given many names along the time, such as *mobs, groups and gangs of capoeiras*. On the other hand, we regard as *individual social profile* *all the social characteristics inherent to an individual*.

Finally, the **psychological profile** refers to *the characteristics of the mental framework of an individual or group of individuals, especially the features of their personality, rooted simultaneously in a biological framework and a social environment, in which they express themselves by being, thinking and acting*. Obviously, in this study we analyse the psychological profile of Capoeira practitioners by means of their personality, based on historical documents of different origins from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and on specific sources of the related literature.

As mentioned, the analysis of the profiles of Capoeira practitioners focuses on documentary and bibliographical data from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in which there are clear references to the fight/game of Capoeira and its practitioners. This condition is

necessary because the term *capoeira* was also used to refer to outlaws in the colonial and imperial periods.

## 2.2. The social profile of Capoeira practitioners

In a social perspective, Capoeira has always been associated with the less favoured classes in Brazil, which until the 19<sup>th</sup> century included black slaves and ex-slaves, racially mixed people and poor people in general (either adults or children, men or women), all of them unemployed. In the eyes of authorities, they were basically vagabonds capable of posing a threat to the physical integrity as well as to the properties of Brazilian citizens.

Gilberto Freyre [19\_\_, pp. 532-573], based on the work *Historical Study on the Police of the Federal Capital from 1808 to 1831*, by Elísio de Araújo, mentions that in Rio de Janeiro, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Capoeira was already repressed to the point of a torture section being designed to *capoeiras*. The reason was that such people lived on the margins of society and were responsible for actions against social peace and order.

Edmundo [2000] provides us with another social portrait of Capoeira practitioners by pointing out the social differences amongst white, black and racially mixed people, noting that the last two groups were preferably used in heavy labour, in spite of their physical differences. “According to the same author, racially mixed people were usually skinny and had thin legs, lacking the “athletic structure of Blacks” and not even possessing “the firm and healthy look of one born in a kingdom”. Nevertheless, “all people” feared them, and even policemen, “as a matter of caution”, respected them”.

The author also points out that *capoeiras* were individuals on the margins of society, and in this regard it is worth citing his description: “Socially, they are a cyst, but could equally be a flower”. This allows us to infer what authorities of that period thought about such individuals, sometimes gentle, respectful and free-hearted, sometimes lazy, violent and dangerous. These characteristics show how harmful their presence could be to Brazilian society and why some people wanted to extinguish them, as demonstrated by historical documents registering statements made by Brazilian politicians from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Two paintings by Rugendas [19\_\_] – “São Salvador” and “Jogo de Capoeiras” – also provided us with descriptions of some of the social profiles of Capoeira practitioners by associating them with the labour of the inferior classes of Brazilian society.

As a confirmation of these social profiles and of the presence of Capoeira itself not only during all the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also during

the second half of it, we found in Líbano [2004] an appreciation of Capoeira as a “rebellious tradition of the urban working class [...] that used to bring together slaves and free people, Brazilians and immigrants, youngsters and adults, black and white people” (p. 15). Furthermore, the author describes *capoeiras* as outlaws, poor and socially inferior people, with bare feet and wretched clothes.

After carrying out an extensive analysis of several documents from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century related to the practice of Capoeira, Araújo [1997] concluded that at that time there was a clear confusion between the actions performed by individuals called *capoeiras* and the ones performed by Capoeira practitioners:

[...] in the first period of that century it was already possible to determine the nature of this physical practice, which probably distinguished it from other practices that promoted tumult and were consequently a threat to the security, physical integrity and tranquillity of the inhabitants of the cities where Capoeira was regularly performed (p. 161).

As for the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Araújo [1997] brings evidence of a transformation within the context of Capoeira practice: it starts to go beyond the margins of society and to get the attention of more favoured classes, reaching members of the national bourgeoisie, the political class and higher education students (Bruno, 1954), whereupon it becomes very diversified in all its aspects, as mentioned in previous paragraphs.

As other authors, Araújo [1997] points out physical, social and psychological characteristics of Capoeira practitioners from Bahia, which are rather similar to the characteristics of practitioners from Rio de Janeiro. He also explores the differences between two large groups of *capoeiras*: the *professional capoeiras*, who had a quite unique body expression and used to wear their own clothing and a gold earring, and the *amateur capoeiras*, who did not use any accessory or special clothing, being only concerned with taking part in challenges and fights.

Capoeira and its practitioners were gradually highly regarded during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as attests their recruitment as bodyguards of the Brazilian social and political elite and as members in the national army, either voluntarily or compulsorily.

According to Freyre [19\_\_, pp. 532-573], in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Capoeira was recognised by both legal and police authorities, and the army started to pay closer attention to it, “not only accepting it but taking its values and techniques for the sake of the community”. All things considered, we conclude that in the aforementioned





**Bahia soldiers “Zouaves”**

[Duarte P.Q. (Gen.) 1986, fig. 4, p. 208]

period Capoeira, as a form of self-defence, reached a higher social status and started to be adopted by Brazilian military forces.

As an example of the first situation, we can mention the prominent figure of Manduca da Praia [Moraes Filho 1946, p. 453], who gained the support of wealthy people for being a Capoeira practitioner and typical tough guy and achieved a better social status in comparison to other Capoeira practitioners of the same period. In the following quote, we can notice different physical, social and psychological profiles in one single person:

Manduca da Praia was a brown-skinned, tall, well-built man and was wearing a long, copper-coloured beard when we saw him. With a felt hat at the top of his head, big eyes and a timed and steady pace, there was something about him that caused fear and trust. Manduca used to sell fish in a street market; he was quite a good trader, earned well and treated himself well. Living in Cidade Nova [a neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro], he was not influenced by the local Capoeira community, having his own life and being a capoeira on his own terms.

The second situation – the adoption of Capoeira by military forces – sends us back to the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Paraguay War takes place, an event that, according to Querino [1955], supported by Araújo [1997], clearly shows the emergence of a new profile of Capoeira practitioners and, as a consequence, a new social status for them. In Querino’s words: “[...] the value of Capoeira as an art of self-defence “[...] where many capoeiras who were part of the Zuavos Baianos group stood out for their achievements”.

In this regard, Araújo [1997, p. 213] states that Capoeira practitioners “proved to be defenders

of the public order and national dignity”, and continues:

[...] in order to provide a better understanding of Capoeira within the military context, I point out that for a long time such space was a way for Capoeira practitioners, regardless of their skin colour, to move up in society [...] There is no doubt that most of the times Capoeira practitioners were introduced to that context for two reasons: to have their habits modified and to increase the contingent of soldiers. There were rare cases in which they were recruited because officers found Capoeira useful to help in the maintenance of the public order.

Vianna [1950, pp. 5-7], in a chronicle named *Valentes à Unha*, reports some fights amongst Capoeira practitioners and between these ones and the police in Salvador, Bahia, during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He mentions to have watched frightening competitions between *winners* and *carters* that used to last several minutes, as the friends of each side would not interpose. When the police arrived, the belligerents stopped fighting amongst themselves and got ready to face the opponent representing the order, but ended up running away to avoid being arrested.

This reference makes clear the social characteristics of Capoeira practitioners in the state of Bahia in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: figures like the tough guy and the amateur *capoeira*, their professions, and the principles and values present within Capoeira groups and in their relations.

The other social profile of Capoeira and its practitioners refers to its collective expression and is particularly related to the social environment of Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though it continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are many authors who registered the achievements of those Capoeira groups, which used to cause fear in both peaceful citizens and policemen by means of practices previously used by *capoeiras* individually, but that were starting to be part of the repertoire of organised groups thanks to mutual help and common aims.

According to Campos [1906, pp. 191-194], *capoeiras* were organised in gangs, the most notorious ones being Conceição da Marinha, Moura, Lapa, Carpinteiros de São José, and Glória. The author points out that the last one, “*in its golden times, [was] the most terrible, having the status of a true political institution*”. He also mentions the decadence of many Capoeira gangs and the later appearance of two large legions named Nagoas and Guaiamus. According to reports provided by many authors, those gangs were organised hierarchically

with each member having clear, well-defined functions.

This collective profile of *capoeiras* was coherent not only with their violent and subversive behaviour but also with the characteristics that distinguished them from other groups, some of which were already mentioned in this essay, namely: the use of specific clothing and accessories as well as of a distinctive language for the Brazilian social context in general and the Capoeira context in particular.

In addition, Campos argues that "*these black and racially mixed people, supposedly lazy and mischievous, were more inclined to criminal actions than to military actions, war dances, or physical or even artistic displays of their manly and jovial energy*"; they left the guardhouse to join the army ranks instead of being used for "national security itself".

According to scholars of the field, Capoeira gangs came out in a spontaneous and friendly way because they wanted to help each other against police pursuit. Their members included all sorts of individuals and they were able to defend themselves with a knife, a razor or any other instrument. Contrasting with the intention of guaranteeing their own protection, they were responsible for many offensive and harmful actions, including aggression, robbery and murder, causing "terror and panic" to the metropolitan population. It is important to mention that all the reports on Capoeira gangs refer only to the states of Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco.

Capoeira gangs were rather aware of the interests of their neighbourhood, so, when the circumstances required a mutual reparation, because one member had been sold as a slave or due to issues related to *capoeiragem*<sup>1</sup>, they tried to meet the interests of the collective, not hesitating to threaten or intimidate people or to use any other method they might judge necessary.

Still regarding marginal groups in Brazil in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Araújo [1997, pp. 161-162] states that they were a clear collective expression of individuals called *capoeiras* and were many times identified as,

[...] bands, groups, mobs, gatherings and finally gangs, the last term being probably the most accurate because of their actions against the established order, whether such groups consisted of real Capoeira practitioners or not.

We notice that, despite the fact that individuals bearing the designation of *capoeiras* and Capoeira

<sup>1</sup> This word had a double meaning in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it referred both to individuals who practised Capoeira and to ordinary thugs of the period.



Physical profiles of *capoeiras* from Rio de Janeiro

- 19<sup>th</sup> century

[Revista Nossa História, 2004, p. 15]

practitioners used to perform similar actions in view of their similar social and economical situation, Capoeira practitioners were different because of their social organisation in gangs, their use of attacking and defensive moves and their particular way of moving legs and arms, all these characteristics being well documented in a variety of sources.

### 2.3. The physical profile of Capoeira practitioners

In both oral and written history, Capoeira has always been associated with individuals belonging to the less favoured classes in Brazilian society. In the past, those individuals included black slaves and ex-slaves, racially mixed people, foreign people from many places, some of them having a work, whereas others would join the groups of vagabonds of the big cities.

As a result of this scenario, the physical profile of Capoeira practitioners has varied to a great extent during Brazilian history, as attested by many pictorial representations of such practitioners, either individually or in organised groups, amateur or professional.

The references provided herein demystify the idea that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Capoeira was exclusively practised by black people and idle people in the main Brazilian cities. For example, Edmundo [2000], by mentioning that they *didn't have the athletic structure of black people, neither the firm*





Jogo de Capoeiras – Plate 18



São Salvador – Plate 27



Negros brigando nos Brasis

and healthy look of one born in a kingdom, but still caused fear, as already quoted, clearly shows that there were racially mixed people amongst Capoeira practitioners yet in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This variety of physical profiles of Capoeira practitioners continued for all the 19<sup>th</sup> century in all Brazilian states, and in this regard the caricatures of such individuals published in newspapers are pretty revealing, since they represent very different body types.

Rugendas [19\_\_, plates 18, p. 77 and 27, p. 33] and Earle [in: James 1955, pp. 151-167, image 7] have equally provided us with descriptions of the profiles of Capoeira practitioners by means of either some very revealing reports on the labour practices of these individuals, which leave no doubts regarding their physical structures, or paintings like “São Salvador”, “Jogo de Capoeiras” and “Negros brigando nos Brasis”, dated from 1820, 1825 and 1822, respectively, and confirmed by descriptions provided by other travelling writers [Avé-Lallemant 1961] who stayed in Brazil in the colonial or imperial period.

Araújo and Jaqueira [2008], based on descriptions of the life of human groups in Brazil during the colonial and imperial periods provided by many authors, inferred both the social situation of individuals on the margins of society

— especially black slaves and ex-slaves – and their professions, finding out groups such as the “slaves for hire, dockers and sailors”. Therefore, Capoeira practitioners had bodies suitable to their tasks, and this confirms their physical profile in the period concerned.

Bretas [1991, pp. 239-256], in his turn, offers a detailed description of other professions associated with Capoeira practitioners, namely: shoemakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, militaries, water carriers, among others that did not require as much physical strength as the ones mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Querino [1955, pp. 67-73] is another author whose works register the presence of Capoeira practitioners in the city of Salvador, presenting them as having an “athletic and young posture”, a consequence of their work as dockers. In fact, the author praises their flexibility, strength and agility, which gave them “powerful resources of attack”.

It is worth mentioning that the physical profiles of Capoeira practitioners should not be distinguished from the profiles of individuals identified as *capoeiras*, except in the use of resources inherent to attacking and defensive movements. In a social perspective, the two groups were pretty much alike.

#### 2.4. The psychological profile of Capoeira practitioners

Unlike some manuscripts from the colonial and imperial periods, in which we can find abundant descriptions of the physical and social profiles of Capoeira practitioners, the work by Edmundo [2000, pp. 52-54] brings references of their psychological profile: "[they] speak strongly, laugh out loud, smell like firewater and argue". The incisive speaking, large smile and disposition to argue with anyone who was up to were the psychological features of those individuals during all the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In a work by Querino [1955] first published in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we found another description of the *capoeiras*' psychological characteristics, but associated with a possible origin of Capoeira. The description reads as follows: "affected, excessively talkative, full of manners, with the well-built type of a Cappadocian", as well as "deceiving, provocative, with vile manners". In view of these features, it was common for them to be cautious against any possible retaliation from their enemies. The following quote makes this point clear:

*Capoeiras* were wary individuals, always distrustful of others. When going for a walk and approaching a corner, they would immediately move to the middle of the street; when going for a trip, if they noticed a man flirting with a woman, they would do a big and menacing jump, without actually attacking the man.

Other psychological characteristics observed by both Querino [1955, pp. 67-73] and Lira Filho [in: Moraes Filho 1946, p. 453] include the laziness and courage of *capoeiras*, the last characteristic being one of the more frequently associated with those individuals along all Brazilian historical periods. Amongst the psychosocial features observed by Querino, Elísio Araújo [1898] and Lima Campos [1906], we can mention the following: loyalty, fellowship and friendship.

To sum up, the descriptions mentioned here and the elements present in several manuscripts from the period between 1808 and 1850 offer diverse profiles of *capoeiras*, and special attention should be given to the psychological profiles, in which the adjectives *violent* and *aggressive* are constant throughout Brazilian history.

Evidently, characteristics such as *aggressive*, *tough*, *troublemaker*, *Cappadocian*, and *deceiving* are not exclusive to practitioners of the Brazilian fight, but actually can be used to refer to all kinds of troublemakers throughout Brazilian history. As a result of being labelled this way, Capoeira

practitioners were persecuted, tortured, arrested and even killed by authorities in all Brazilian historical periods.

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## Sylwetki praktyków capoeiry w XIX i XX stuleciu

**Słowa kluczowe:** brazylijski, tło historyczne, fizyczna, społeczna i psychologiczna charakterystyka

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst pochodzi z monografii, której pierwszym celem było określenie profili współczesnych praktyków sztuki walki/gry *capoeira* w centrum Portugalii. Drugim celem monografii, ale nie mniej ważnym, była identyfikacja profili praktyków capoeiry z XIX wieku, aby oba zestawienia mogły zostać zidentyfikowane zwłaszcza na obszarze kontynentalnej Portugalii.

Na tej podstawie przeprowadzono analizę profili adeptów capoeiry z trzech brazylijskich okresów historycznych tzn. kolonialnego, imperialnego oraz republikańskiego, które trwały około 200 lat, przyznając, że to podejście antropologiczne w przypadku walki brazylijskiej jest domniemane.

Ponieważ *capoeira* jest jedną z sztuk walki, które są najczęściej uprawiane na świecie, oznacza to, że stała się globalna we wszystkich wariantach. W związku z tym stało się konieczne przeprowadzenie analitycznych badań kilku dokumentów w szczególności w odniesieniu do związanej z nią literatury z XIX i XX wieku w celu uzyskania lepszej wiedzy o jej szczególnych cechach charakterystycznych. Do tej pory taka charakterystyka została naświetlona przez badaczy z wielu krajów. Jednakże te badania nie dostarczyły żadnych analiz fizycznych, społecznych czy psychologicznych dotyczących adeptów capoeiry, stąd cel powyższych badań.

Na przestrzeni brazylijskiej historii pojęcie *capoeira* nie zostało użyte w jeden tylko sposób. Aczkolwiek przez przeprowadzenie dokładnej dokumentacji i bibliografii można nie tylko zidentyfikować te znaczenia, lecz także dokonać porównania. Słowo *capoeira* oznaczało z jednej strony osobę praktykującą ten styl walki, a drugiej strony osiłka, a jako nazwa stylu walki istniała tylko w pierwszej dekadzie XIX wieku. Natomiast słowo *capoeirista* zaczęło oznaczać adepta tej sztuki walki dopiero w pierwszej połowie XX wieku, w stanie Bahia.

Pochodzenie capoeiry jest kontrowersyjnym tematem spowodowanym brakiem dokumentów lub badań naukowych, które mogłyby kategorycznie potwierdzić lub obalić proponowane hipotezy. Autorzy niniejszej pracy przebadali literaturę tematu i zaprezentowali różne poglądy dotyczące pochodzenia capoeiry. Teoria mówiąca, że styl ten przybył z Afryki nie jest według autorów pracy potwierdzona i bardziej skłaniają się do przyznania, iż *capoeira* powstała w Brazylii u zbiegu kultur.

Następna część pracy dotyczy profilu rozumianego jako wszystkie cechy, aspekty, charakterystyki związane z osobą lub osobami, które ujawniły się w szczególnym czasie i miejscu w sprzyjających okolicznościach. Autorzy biorą pod uwagę profil fizyczny (wygląd zewnętrzny), społeczny oraz psychologiczny. W perspektywie społecznej *capoeira* kojarzona była z mniej uprzywilejowanymi klasami w Brazylii i aż do XIX wieku obejmowała czarnoskórych niewolników, byłych niewolników, ludzi mieszanego pochodzenia i biedotę oraz bezrobotnych. W oczach władz ludzie ci stanowili zagrożenie oraz żyli często na marginesie społeczeństwa, a opinie o nich były często negatywne.

Dopiero w drugiej połowie XIX wieku istnieją dowody przemiany w spojrzeniu na capoeirę, gdy zaczyna ona wzbudzać zainteresowanie bogatszych klas i bardziej wykształconych warstw społeczeństwa. Zaczynają się także wyróżniać dwie grupy praktykujących: amatorzy i zawodowcy. Ci drudzy znajdują zatrudnienie jako ochroniarze lub żołnierze. Niestety w Brazylii zaczynają pojawiać się także gangi złożone z adeptów capoeiry. Zwracają oni na siebie uwagę wyglądem zewnętrznym, charakterystycznym strojem i akcesoriami, a także specyficznym językiem. W zbiorowych opisach psychologicznych pojawiają się pozytywne określenia takie jak: przyjazny, lojalny, odważny, ale także wiele negatywnych: agresywny, przewrotowy, oszukańczy co w rezultacie nie wpływa dobrze na rozwój capoeiry, a wielu jej zwolenników jest prześladowanych, aresztowanych, a nawet zabitych przez władze w Brazylii.

Praca zawiera także ciekawe ryciny i rysunki przedstawiające adeptów capoeiry.