

Short Article

The Afro-Brazilian/Afro-Caribbean Martial Arts Tradition: Two Women Practitioners Speak on Its Socio-Cultural Benefits and Practice Challenges in the Inner-City

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes the views and experiences of two women, one African American and one Afro-Caribbean, who are practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian martial art of Capoeira and its complementary stick-fighting arts, Kalenda and Maculéle. They have spent, respectively, 30 years and 4 years studying these arts, variants of which permeate much of the Caribbean and parts of Central and South America, where populations of African descent live. In a previously published study, I provided a detailed account of the school where these women practice, and interviewed some of its students and its head instructor. These two women were not part of that initial study. However, their interviews, collected here, add appreciably to our understanding of this school's significance by analyzing their perceptions of martial arts practice, a topic largely discussed by men. I focus on their experiences and unique perspectives, which cover issues of cultural identity, gender challenges, and the personal growth they have undergone as a result of their studies. The cultural difference paradigm and the ACBCM (African-centered behavioral change model) were used to evaluate how gender, culture, and self-perceptions influence their lived experiences within the practice studio and in the wider world.

Keywords: African-based martial arts, Capoeira, Cultural difference paradigm, African-centered behavioral change model

Os Malandros de Mestre Touro is the name of a small but vibrant martial arts studio in inner-city San Diego, CA. It has been in continuous existence since 2002, making it one of the longest-lasting cultural institutions in what has recently been designated as The Black Arts and Culture District, an urban tract nine blocks long on upper Imperial Ave, running from 61st to 69th Street. Public art, murals, businesses, storefront churches and Mosques, and social gathering places form a cultural hub that revitalizes the living spaces of its inner-city residents while serving as a barrier against poorly planned housing projects and gentrification.

Someone passing by might miss it entirely; no shiny trophies line its windows, and if the door happened to be open, the passerby would not see students punching and kicking in flashy matching uniforms in front of a glass mirror covering the wall. However, external appearances can be deceiving. Once inside, one would see earnest students practicing, some in loose-fitting street clothes, others in white pants and white T-shirts with the school logo. Most of the students are young males, with some older males; a smaller number of female students are present as well. While I interviewed female students in my initial study, I wanted to take a deeper dive into gender, family, and other concerns facing female martial arts practitioners for this paper. Except for a relatively small number of high-profile female martial arts practitioners of African descent, very little scholarly attention has

been paid to the challenges faced by the smaller but growing body of female practitioners, and virtually no attention has been paid to female practitioners of African-based martial arts in North America.

Methods

A primary tool used was cultural immersion: I watched approximately the first half of a two-hour class on May 1, 2026, then listened to the head instructor's critique of their practice following that portion of the class. He brought to their attention that some students were unfocused and needed to give their practice partners more of their attention and energy; he told them that just because what they are doing is called Capoeira "play" does not mean these skills should be treated as unserious. He reminded them that males and females who had been enslaved used these skills to stay alive and fend off the attacks of slaveholders "back in the day." I continued to observe the remainder of their afternoon training session at the school, and observed how both women maintained their focus, which challenged the younger students to be more serious. The remainder of the class was dedicated to Kalenda, the use of a long wooden staff for self-defense. I then conducted taped interviews with the two women. The first interview was conducted simultaneously with both students on May 1, 2026. A follow-up phone interview was conducted with one of the women on May 3, 2026. Discussions follow the interviews, using

the cultural difference paradigm and the ACBCM (African-centered behavioral change model).

Findings

Khadija White is African American and has lived in San Diego most of her life. She has practiced Capoeira for over thirty years and is highly ranked as a Capoeira Professor. Daniela Bracey was born and raised in Puerto Rico, has studied Capoeira for approximately four years, and, as a young mother, first enrolled her children in the school and then joined them, strengthening their family bond. This section contains their interviews with minimal editing of their words, followed by evaluative discussions. Both women responded freely and interactively to questions, engaging in a back-and-forth that added nuance to each other's comments. The letter "I" identifies the interviewer and author:

I: I'd like you to share a little bit about your history and background in the study of martial arts, particularly your experiences with Afro-Brazilian martial arts. Tell me, what attracted you to Afro-Brazilian martial arts?

Daniela: I am from Puerto Rico, where movement to music, especially the sound of drums, is a major part of most everything you do in life. And since Capoeira's movement is based on these rhythms of life, it is one of the big reasons I got drawn to the art. It was an easier and a natural thing for me to do the Capoeira moves to the drums. It was also very important to me to find a way to keep my kids involved in something that would remind them of themselves, and not erase or forget who they are. I think that's what Capoeira does for them. And being a part of this school gives me a sense of community, because that's what we have here--a community. The self-defense part is like icing on the cake, but if I have to defend myself and my family, I can. I do have some prior martial arts training from my time in the military. I also studied Muay Thai and kickboxing, but again, it was the music that spoke to me, and then everything else came along with it.

Khadija: My mother started me in Capoeira when I was very young – I was around the art as early as four years old. She has always been committed to the Nguzo Saba principles of Kwanzaa and taught me about its cultural values [Kwanzaa is an African American cultural holiday. For more details, see the second discussion]. She wanted me to learn about African culture and the African Diaspora and to incorporate that knowledge into my life in a practical way--especially its self-defense aspects-- from an African cultural perspective. That's how we survived!

Discussion #1: Daniela's point sheds light on Capoeira's appeal to many women of color [1], commenting on gender challenges, notes that Black girls growing up were often self-conscious: "...girls don't want to appear uncoordinated in front of boys... It's the job of coaches to provide heavy doses of encouragement and motivation to females who are insecure about their athletic performance" (p.14). In my previous observations of classes and public performances, the presence of drumming and other live Afro-Brazilian instrumentation (an inseparable aspect of head instructor Mestre Preto Velho's teaching) appeared not only to support female coordination by aligning movement with the drumbeat, but also, for some of the younger

female students, encouraged creative movement in their Capoeira and allayed self-consciousness. Daniela noted that Afro-Brazilian music is integral to her focus during practice and performance.

Khadija's response is succinctly framed by the cultural difference paradigm. It asserts that the thinking, behavior, and social conditions of Black and other peoples are best understood by considering the strengths and limits of their cultures [2]. Thus, cultural awareness should be a prerequisite for those working with various cultural groups. The Nguzo Saba, or the principles of Kwanzaa are increasingly becoming important aspects of African-American culture and have been since its inception in 1966. Its founder, Dr. Maulana Karenga, describes it as a "culture which is the thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself through its history and humanity" [3]. **[end of discussion #1]**

I: Concerning mixed gender or co-ed classes, how do you view this type of training? Is it a challenge for you as a woman? And do your children or the other children seem to have any mixed feelings about it?

Daniela: Well, if that feeling arises in some of the kids, it gets shut down [by head instructor Mestre Preto] real quick because, at the end of the day, who are you gonna go up against? You have to know how to go up against anybody, no matter how big, no matter if they are male, female, young, or old.

Khadija: And that's the point. That's what this is for--your self-defense in any situation. You never know if you're gonna be up against someone of the same gender out in the world. And as Daniela said earlier, this is a community; we are all here to support and challenge each other. This is the only martial arts community I've ever known. We appreciate sparring with our male counterparts; it trains us to get over the nervousness of being confronted by a big man.

I grew up in this culture. And as an African-American, we've lost that culture of community where men and women, boys and girls, young and old worked together. This is a way to reconnect to Africa and the African diaspora.

Daniela: I am a little person, and as women, especially little women, we have had to learn not to depend on brute physical strength; our strength, or a big part of it, comes from *malicia*, a Capoeira word that we translate as "tricknology." This means that we all learn techniques that conceal our intentions until we see an opportunity to counter our opponent's moves in ways they don't have a defense against.

I: I would like you both to speak to or describe the "warrior" mindset you have developed through your practice that equips you to deal with the physical safety and mental well-being challenges you may have experienced as women. I ask because, in general, women face more challenges and stressful situations than most men. You just mentioned the cultural aspect of your training. How has that helped you deal with the challenges you face in life? And if so, how?

Daniela: Yes, I've improved my well-being and that of my kids in both the physical and mental areas. On the physical level, we are more fit. We come in here two to three times a week and feel more physically confident. Mentally, I've learned how to strategize quickly

before acting. It's becoming easier, and you have to know how to do that in Capoeira. My kids have gotten better; for instance, I appreciate that they are learning to follow instructions and to take correction positively, without attitude. They "get it" that this is good for them. That's because this environment supports them culturally.

Khadija: And when it comes to our safety, we are learning an art that keeps us in constant motion, on our feet, upside down on our hands, on the ground, and in the air. We don't learn by doing kata, those set forms you see in karate tournaments; that's not a part of this culture. We learn our art by doing constant sparring and two-person exercises with each other. As for the warrior spirit, we've learned that it's more than about physical strength. It's knowing *when* to walk away and *how* to walk away without being perceived as weak. At other times, we use the malicia culture we talked about earlier as a kind of sleight of hand, where we pretend to be weak to distract the opponent, then redirect their strength while maintaining a calm demeanor.

Discussion #2: [4] argue that behavioral change "occurs through the process of culturalization". This is achieved through cultural realignment, which aims to reduce unproductive social conditions by replacing them with prosocial, life-affirming ones. At the school, this is accomplished by culturally realigning students with traditional African and African-American cultural values to enhance their well-being. This is accompanied by cognitive restructuring, so that people can reconfigure how they view themselves in the world they live in, and by character refinement, a process whereby people adjust their mental and ethical attributes to align with their cultural essence [2]. A close reading of the self-development undergone by Khadija and Daniela, and the culturally based worldviews they describe, connects organically with the cultural realignment and cognitive restructuring models of the ACBCM paradigm. They express the teachings of head instructor Mestre Preto Velho, and are embedded in the structure of Os Malandros' curriculum. Khadija says that Mestre refers to that structure as his African reconnection program, which is the essence of his life's work. **[end of discussion #2]**

Finally, I asked either one to address what they would say to a group of young black and brown teenage girls and women who were wrestling with the challenges of living in the inner city. What would they tell them about how their practice of Afro-Brazilian arts has benefited their lives and how it could benefit them? Daniela spoke up and said she would tell them that studying this art is about studying and learning about themselves and their real culture, not street culture. "When you have that [self-knowledge]," she said, "you are better able to cope with what life throws at you [5]."

Conclusion

These women's experiences and observations speak to the challenges faced by women who take care of their well-being and that of their families through Capoeira, and who speak to and sometimes for the community in which they live. In Khadija's case, her mother actively encouraged her to embrace her culture from an early age. In Daniela's case, she did the same for her children by enrolling them in Capoeira. Both women have at their disposal a physical and mental tool chest as part of a culturally rich, African-centered martial art. They have shown how it serves their personal and family priorities.

At this juncture in their lives, they recognize that it is not enough to learn the physical aspects of a martial art solely for their own benefit; they are ready to serve as ambassadors for a way of life that can uplift others mentally, physically, and spiritually, in a way that contributes to their community's potential.

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