




The Marajoara Wrestling: between vernacular practice and institutionalization

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Abstract

The Marajoara Wrestling is a traditional grappling and throwing fight, typical of Marajó Island in the state of Pará, northern Brazil. The sport is going through a process of expansion through competitions and tournaments. The objective of this research is to understand elements and experiences specific to the institutionalization process in the Marajoara Wrestling through an empirical-phenomenological investigation. It is an exploratory, qualitative study, anchored in interviews and supported by ethnographic procedures to produce a broad understanding of the cultural contexts of the Marajoara Wrestling, as well as its practical and technical objectivity. The results are divided into three parts: Marajoara Wrestling and Tradition in Techniques; Marajoara Wrestling and its institutionalization; Marajoara Wrestling versus *Agarrada*. Understanding the phenomena present in Marajoara Wrestling makes it possible to understand the tensions in the process of institutionalizing the sport. Understanding these tensions enables an interventionist and educational role in Marajoara Wrestling, which is of interest applied to both Physical Education and Sports Psychology.

Keywords: Martial arts; vernacular martial arts; combat sports; traditional sports; traditional games; Marajoara Wrestling; *Agarrada*; Brazil; phenomenology.

La Lucha Marajoara: entre la práctica vernácula y la institucionalización

Resumen

La Lucha Marajoara es una lucha tradicional de agarre y proyección, típica de la Isla de Marajó, en el estado de Pará, al norte de Brasil. Este deporte está atravesando un proceso de expansión gracias a la celebración de competiciones y torneos. El objetivo de esta investigación es comprender los elementos y experiencias específicas del proceso de institucionalización de la Lucha Marajoara mediante una investigación empírico-fenomenológica. Se trata de un estudio exploratorio y cualitativo, basado en entrevistas y respaldado por procedimientos etnográficos para lograr una comprensión amplia de los contextos culturales de la Lucha Marajoara, así como de su objetividad práctica y técnica. Los resultados se dividen en tres partes: Lucha Marajoara y la Tradición en las

A Luta Marajoara: entre a prática vernacular e a institucionalização

Resumo

A Luta Marajoara é uma luta tradicional de agarre e projeção, típica da Ilha de Marajó, no estado do Pará, norte do Brasil. O esporte vem passando por um processo de expansão por meio de competições e torneios. O objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender elementos e experiências específicas do processo de institucionalização da Luta Marajoara por meio de uma investigação empírico-fenomenológica. Trata-se de um estudo exploratório e qualitativo, ancorado em entrevistas e apoiado em procedimentos etnográficos para produzir uma compreensão ampla dos contextos culturais da Luta Marajoara, bem como de sua objetividade prática e técnica. Os resultados estão divididos em três partes: Luta Marajoara, e a Tradição

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Técnicas; Lucha Marajoara y su institucionalización; Lucha Marajoara versus *Agarrada*. Comprender los fenómenos presentes en la Lucha Marajoara permite entender las tensiones en el proceso de institucionalización del deporte. A su vez, comprender estas tensiones posibilita una actuación intervencionista y educativa en la Lucha Marajoara, de interés tanto para la Educación Física como para la Psicología del Deporte.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; artes marciales vernáculas; deportes de combate; deportes tradicionales; juegos tradicionales; Lucha Marajoara; *Agarrada*; Brasil; fenomenología.

nas Técnicas; Luta Marajoara e sua institucionalização; Luta Marajoara versus *Agarrada*. Compreender os fenômenos presentes na Luta Marajoara possibilita entender as tensões no processo de institucionalização do esporte. Compreender essas tensões permite uma atuação interventiva e educativa na Luta Marajoara, com interesse aplicado tanto à Educação Física quanto à Psicologia do Esporte.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; artes marciais vernáculas; esportes de combate; esportes tradicionais; jogos tradicionais; luta marajoara; *Agarrada*; Brasil; fenomenologia.

1. Introduction

If Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Capoeira are arguably the most famous martial arts and combat sports (MA&CS) in this continental country that is Brazil, among the countless fighting systems practiced in its territory, native or not, Marajoara¹ Wrestling is probably emerging as the third of the best known national sports². Marajoara Wrestling originates from the Marajó Archipelago, where the largest river island in the world is located, in the state of Pará, northern region of Brazil. According to the IBGE (2022) census, the island has an area of 49 thousand km², with a population of 593,000 inhabitants. It is in the context of the hard work in the countryside, especially in the services of cowboys taking care of cattle and buffalo, that the population there shares its experiences and traditions (Santos & Freitas, 2018). Marajoara Wrestling is the result of an intersection of knowledge and experience in the Marajoara lands, socially constituted by different bodily practices.

Marajoara Wrestling takes place between two fighters on sand, clay, grass, or mud terrain. There are variations of the fight on the island itself, with the differences depending on the town or city in which it is practiced (Seabra et al., 2020). The “traditional” Marajoara Wrestling, which used to be practiced only by cowboys, had two main rules: those that define how it begins and how it ends. The fight begins with the feet locked, when the opponent's foot touches the opponent's, facing each other, almost upright, with the hands touching flat, very similar to Greco-Roman wrestling. The end of the fight only occurred when the opponent's shoulder blade touched the ground. There were other rules, such as the prohibition of percussive blows, punches or kicks. It is a predominantly male-dominated sport, but there is no ban on women fighting. Since there is a low level of participation in the practice among women, this research used only one female practitioner to conduct the interview, due to the difficulty in finding female practitioners.

The main theory accepted in academia about the origin of the Marajoara Wrestling is the exchange of knowledge and experiences between the peoples of the island, however, the greatest influence is attributed to the indigenous peoples who passed through the region (Santos & Freitas, 2018). Marajó is located in the state of Pará, and in the state itself there is a form of indigenous fighting similar to the Marajoara Wrestling in terms of its technical movements, the *Aipenkuít*. However, in the North region, there are other fights with almost identical movements. The *Idjassú* in the state of Tocantins. The *Piãguá* fighting system in the state of Amazonas. Also, in the north of the state of Mato Grosso, in the Central-West region, but close to the border with Pará, we have the indigenous fight associated with the *Quarup* ritual, in homage to the illustrious dead of the *Bakairi* people of Xingu. In the state Maranhão, there is another form of traditional grappling fight of indigenous Brazilian origin, the *Tarracá*. Given this, the version of academic studies is that there is no doubt as to the indigenous culture, present in the past on the island of Marajó. However, the influences of the black people and cowboys of the region who, later, would join the formation of the Marajoara Wrestling should not be underestimated.

¹ The etymology of the word *Marajoara* comes from the Tupi MBARA-IO, “taken from the sea” or “bulkhead of the sea”, which depicts its position at the mouth of the Amazon River. The term is used to designate people who were born on Marajó Island. The island is known for being home to a rich and ancient indigenous culture.

² Noticed by the international impact of the islanders in professional combat sports, such as UFC (Iuri Marajó and Deiveson Figueiredo).



The Marajoara Wrestling is considered a cultural tradition of great importance in the region and is also strongly linked to the religious context, for example in the cultural manifestations present at the *Glorioso São Sebastião* (Glorious Saint Sebastian) Festival. In 2013, the IPHAN (Institute of Historical Heritage and National Artistic) recognized the fight as an intangible traditional cultural element linked to the celebration of the Glorious Saint Sebastian. For about two decades, Marajoara Wrestling has been going through a process of institutionalization, gaining clear sporting contours and organizations that regulate its tournaments and competitions.

1.1. Martial art and combat sport

In theory and practice (Martínková & Parry, 2015), there is no terminological consensus as to what a martial art or combat sport actually is. An example is Greco-Roman wrestling, where there are practitioners who call it a combat sport and others who call it a martial art (Coelho & Barreira, 2020). However, it is quite common for martial arts to be understood as educational activities whose purpose is to improve fighting through the acquisition of traditional techniques, emphasizing self-development in the formation of character, virtues, and morals (Müller Júnior & Capraro, 2020) martial arts are often associated with ideals and teachings that become the so-called philosophy of the modality, often approaching some religious practice and sense of spirituality (Telles & Barreira, 2023). In combat sports, we also try to provide safety and limit risks through rules, but in sports registration, competition is more prominent. Even though the practice of sport is usually accompanied by moral precepts and educational components, their exclusion does not distort it, since the determining factor of sport is the competition (Parlebas, 2001), that is, the objective of overcoming the opponent (Martínková & Parry, 2015).

1.2. Vernacular martial art

In vernacular martial arts, there is no structured curriculum by which a beginner progresses from basic skills to more complex ones. The most common method of learning to fight is by observation. Teaching is done from the most experienced fighter to the least experienced, who passes on his knowledge and techniques, usually orally and in a casual manner (Green, 2012).

In the Brazilian territory, the fighting systems practiced by different indigenous groups can be classified as vernacular martial arts. An example is *Xondaro*, a fight/dance that exists among the *Guarani-Mbya* and *Nhandewa-Tupi* peoples (Mendes, 2006). Another form of combat is *huka-huka*, a traditional fighting style of the Xingu indigenous people, the *Bakairi*, from the state of Mato Grosso (Valente et al., 2022; Lee & Lauwaert, 2021). There is also *Idjassú*, a fighting style of the *Karajá*, in the state of Tocantins. In addition, there is *Piãguá*, from the *Maraguás* people, traditionally from Amazonas. Finally, *Aipenquit*, which is a traditional style of the *Paracatejê-gavião*, from Pará, as well as the *Tapirapé* and *Xavante* from Mato Grosso (Almeida & Suassuna, 2010). Finally, in addition to the fighting systems of the indigenous peoples, there is the currently discussed modality, originally practiced by cowboys, the Marajoara Wrestling, also known mainly as *Agarrada*³ in the region, which meets the criteria to be considered an AMV. The Marajoara Wrestling and the other vernacular martial arts are part of ways of life whose philosophies and values are passed down through generations of communities in the practice of hand-to-hand combat.

1.3. The Institutionalization Process

Marajoara Wrestling was a practice entirely associated with rural workers, without a standardized teaching structure (Santos & Freitas, 2018). Until the end of the 20th century, there was no formalized training with teachers who systematically applied a protocol consisting of warm-up, analytical training of blows, teaching techniques and corrections. If it is possible to consider that there was any training, it took place in practice, i.e. it was trained by fighting; usually the “coach” was the father figure of the young fighter, who taught after practice or talked about his own fighting systems. Nowadays, however, training is provided by experienced practitioners and physical education professionals. There are standardized training sessions that follow a logic developed by

³ It can be translated by *Agarrada* (*Grab*), but for reasons of preserving the original term of the modality, we decided not to use the translation throughout the text. This modality is better known as *Agarrada* on the island, especially by the older people. And the term Marajoara Wrestling is better known by the young people and those who are from outside the island.



the trainers: stretching, warming up, striking practice, fighting systems that are always interrupted for instructions. So, there is a difference between the Marajoara Wrestling of the 20th century and the fight of the 21st century. One of these differences is the name of the modality itself, which until the end of the last century was better known as *Agarrada* and was gradually adopted as Marajoara Wrestling, which is currently the predominant name in literature and institutions. Regardless of the name, the popular way of practicing it persists in the archipelago, especially among the cowboys who work in the fields. The practice of a more sporting nature is present in the populated areas of the island, in the centers of its small towns. In view of this, this text will from now on adopt the convention of using the term *Agarrada* to refer to the way of fighting as a popular martial art, leaving "Marajoara Wrestling" to refer to the way of practicing it as a combat sport. The Cachoeira do Arari Marajoara Wrestling Tournament began in 2002⁴. Besides being the oldest, we can assume that this event marks the beginning of the institutionalization of Marajoara Wrestling. The "Paraense Marajoara Wrestling Federation" and the "Brazilian Marajoara Wrestling League" had their official foundations recently, in 2020 and 2021, respectively. In these two decades, the creation of sports rules for fighting coincided with the holding of regional tournaments in Ponta de Pedra, Soure, Salvaterra and Cachoeira do Arari. It is impossible to dissociate this institutionalization - which formalized the sporting character of this modality, until then strictly popular - from these tournaments, especially the one that takes place every year on January 20, in Cachoeira do Arari. If, like so many martial arts, the origins of Marajoara Wrestling are lost in the mists of the past, it is quite reasonable to assume that the institutionalization of Marajoara Wrestling as a combat sport and, eventually, as a modern martial art, has as its seminal milestone the Cachoeira do Arari Tournament of 2002. However, this does not diminish the importance of other events and agents in the process that brought the fight to the visibility it has today, such as the impact on religious festivities or, more recently, the rise and international fame of islanders in professional combat modalities, such as MMA (Iuri Marajó and Deiveson Figueiredo established themselves in the UFC, where the latter became champion in 2020), without forgetting the inclusion of the fighting system in the National Common Curricular Base, which took place in 2018. (Coelho & Barreira, 2025)

2. Methods

This qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study was conducted through an empirical phenomenological investigation, aiming to understand the specific experiences involved in the institutionalization process of *Agarrada* for the Marajoara Wrestling. The methodological approach included participant observation and in-depth phenomenological interviews, conducted under the principle of Suspensive Listening (Barreira, 2010; Barreira & Coelho Júnior, 2023).

The phenomenological interviews were semi-structured and conducted with Marajoara wrestlers who met the selection criterion of a minimum of three years of experience in the practice of the modality. This criterion was adopted to ensure that participants had significant lived experiences in the fight and could provide in-depth accounts of the transformations in the institutionalization process. These reports were recorded and transcribed for comparative analysis according to the phenomenological perspective.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee to protect the identities of the combatants. Therefore, pseudonyms were used for the interviewees to avoid identification. The study was conducted in different locations on Marajó Island, covering the municipalities of Cachoeira do Arari, Ponta de Pedras, Soure, Salvaterra, and Santa Cruz. A total of 17 Marajoara wrestlers were interviewed. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms, age and years of Marajoara Wrestling practice of these participants).

Table 1. Data on interviewees.

Name	Age	Years of practice
Paulo	72 years	67 years
Marcos	65 years	66 years
Pedro	66 years	60 years
Lucas	55 years	45 years
João	45 years	40 years
Carlos	44 years	35 years
José	40 years	30 years
Francisco	38 years	31 years
Antonio	36 years	30 years
Roberto	36 years	30 years
Leandro	40 years	34 years
Walter	40 years	10 years
Bruno	26 years	17 years
Joana	38 years	30 years
Flávio	65 years	60 years
Vinicius	69 years	62 years
Anderson	35 years	30 years

⁴ Organized by Dr. Nelson Calandrini, family Araújo, Pio, Preto Melo, Romão and others.



As part of a larger project funded by FAPESP, the first field trip to Marajó Island was conducted in January 2022 by the last author of this article, sparking interest in a specific topic within this regional fighting practice. During that year, the interviews conducted were transcribed. The second field trip, carried out in January 2023 by the first author, expanded the scope of observations and interviews.

Participant observation was conducted by two researchers, each spending two weeks immersed in the community, closely following training sessions, tournaments, and the daily interactions of Marajoara Wrestling practitioners. The Marajoara Wrestling Tournament in Cachoeira do Arari, held on January 20, 2022, and 2023, was a key moment for data collection, as most interviews were conducted during this event. Additional interviews were carried out in Soure during the first trip and in Ponta de Pedras during the second.

Through the ethnographic description of situational aspects of the modality—such as the environmental, normative, and social context—we begin to extract the essential elements of these experiences. It is necessary to set aside prior knowledge of the modality to allow the meaning of the fight to emerge through the intentional crossing of experience reports and ethnographic observations (Barreira & Ranieri, 2013), avoiding conceptual interference that could lead to preconceived conclusions, as explanatory theories and analytical categories external to the practitioners' experiential field. No notions such as “tradition”, “culture” or “sport” in their academic or normative definitions are used, nor are pre-existing psychological or sociological models used. The aim is to suspend such assumptions – a movement known as *epoché* – so that the meanings can emerge directly from the experience reported by the subjects themselves, in their own language and logic. The interview and analysis process assumes an openness to how the fight appears in the intentionality of the Marajoara practitioner, thus conducting research with a phenomenological orientation (Barreira & Massimi, 2008). In short, the intentional crossing of these reports allows us to grasp and understand the elements and experiences that determine the institutionalization process of *Agarrada* into the Marajoara Wrestling.

The comparative analysis from the phenomenological perspective adopted in this study is not guided by external parameters or previously defined categories, but by attentive and descriptive listening to the experience lived by the interviewees. This is a comparison that emerges from the rigorous description of the meanings attributed by the practitioners themselves to Luta Marajoara, respecting the nuances of their trajectories, affections and bodily understandings. This type of analysis, as outlined by Barreira (2017a) and based on the phenomenological tradition, allows us to intertwine the reports without subjecting them to a hierarchy or conceptual normativity. Instead of comparing in order to classify or judge, phenomenology compares in order to understand, seeking to reveal the complexity of the lived meanings that structure the bodily practices in their original context.

The transcription of the interviews in this study followed an approach guided by the preservation of the interviewees' natural speech, considering their linguistic expressions, pauses, repetitions and their own ways of narrating the experience. This methodological choice is consistent with the principles of phenomenology, which values language as a privileged vehicle for lived experience, allowing meaning to manifest itself in its original form. Preparing the ground for the excerpts that will be analyzed later, this form of transcription aims to respect the rhythm and texture of the speeches, avoiding reductions that could compromise the density of the reported experience. In this way, the reports remain anchored in their condition of testimony, being understood as legitimate expressions of a shared world of meanings, and not just as data to be categorized.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Marajoara Wrestling and Tradition in Techniques

During the field research, the organization of the Marajoara Wrestling Tournament in Cachoeira do Arari, on January 20, 2023, was observed. During the preparation of the event, several debates about the characteristics of the tournament could be observed, mainly within the framework of the rules. “Why is there a fixed time in the fight, since in *Agarrada* there was never time?” The interviewee José explains: “There was no time, when the two were fighting and one realized that he

wasn't going to win, he could give up". However, this withdrawal was not well received by the fighters, who treated it as a weakness of the one who gave up. In the same report, José says: "But it was very demoralizing for him. Totally demoralising. I didn't have time to fight. Today it would be bullying, right?" .

Another common topic in town was why some striking techniques were banned since they were part of the sport's history. There is a rejection on the part of the older practitioners of this new way of fighting, with training and rules that did not exist before. They do not consider these changes as part of the fight and refuse to accept the new rules. Some strikes - the "enhancement" and the "collection" - involved falls that dropped the opponent headfirst to the ground, which were banned in all championships with the justification of the athletes' safety. Concerns about the use of these strikes in fighting systems arise from reports of injuries or even deaths resulting from them:

A sad scene that happened was the death of a young man, [...]. They were drinking and suddenly they asked to fight. At the moment they agreed to fight, the boy carried him and let him go, and the boy hit his head on the cement and died. [...] For a long time, this was a mark in the fight, that people should be careful when they play, to avoid this kind of injury. (João)

Despite such a tragic outcome, there are those who defend the existence of these scams. One of the interviewees questions the ban on the collection: "This is what they called the collection. It was banned, right? But... but why? Because there's no, there's no reason, right? The collection is a matter of lightness" (Pedro). Regarding the preservation of tradition in the area of body techniques (Nunes et al., 2023), it is necessary to appreciate old techniques, since some strikes are forbidden in tournaments and therefore fall. The "boi laranjeira" or "boi vaca" trick, which is still allowed, is an example of this, although it is rarely used today:

A blow that humiliated the opponent, because the one who received it was considered "soft", "weak" and "not very smart" [...] With the process of sportization and the concern to control the safety of practices, the blow was withdrawn and few use it today. (Nunes et al., 2023, p. 7)

Despite the existence of federations and leagues, the rules that have institutionalized the fight are still strongly questioned, especially by those who cultivate customs that are threatened by the rules. In this sense, one of the interviewees says:

The guys want to change things up, add other features to the fight. No, the Marajoara Wrestling is about falling down and putting your back to the ground with your foot wedged in, nothing else. So, I'm going to file an appeal, based on the law. [...] For the federation to bring any fight, there is no problem, but it does not change the original things, because it is lost culturally, the cultural value goes away [...]. (Lucas).

In the reports of the practitioners, there is a certain experience of fight that disappears when it is institutionalized or, in another way, subjected to new rules and norms. It is therefore necessary to go beyond this more superficial level (preservation of customs, values and identity) in order to reach the experiences that, in this case, are threatened by the perspective of appropriation. Tradition and values are correlated with a unique experience and way of fighting. Eliminating strikes, defining the time of the fight, means not only making the sport safer, but also changing its original experience. The fight has no time, it outlines a horizon of challenge in a physical and psychological sense, as resistance and determination. Fighting with this horizon is a very different experience from fighting according to rules. The same is true for the possibility of delivering or receiving certain blows, in outlining the horizon of this fighting experience and, consequently, the fighting experience itself. The reports of "married feet⁵, nothing more" (Lucas), "collection is a matter of lightness" (Pedro) give traces of this horizon specific to the *Agarrada* that is threatened, they give traces, correlatively, of a concrete experience of fighting that also disappears.

⁵The term "pés casados" ("married feet") is not common in Portuguese, it is a very characteristic expression of the Marajó region, to designate feet together, one next to the other. The fighting system should start with one foot of each fighter side by side (married) and hands held.

3.2. Marajoara Wrestling and its institutionalization

The institutionalization process is complex; there are those who defend the permanence of *Agarrada* without change, but on the other hand there are those who argue that the fight needs to adapt to new times. One justification for this is the perception that the practice is losing followers. This is what Marcos about the activity in the early 2000s: “When I was a kid, I remember there were more fighting systems, people fought more. It seems that this is coming to an end. I don't see these people”. It was from this perception that the initiative to create the first Marajoara Wrestling Tournament was born, in the city of Cachoeira do Arari. Flávio, in contrast to the older *Agarrada* practitioners, talks about the process of sportivizing the fight: “Everything is evolving, we cannot disagree with that, because everything is evolving, it is normal that things change. There are people who already want to fight outside”... (Flávio, 63 years old). At the same time, there are those who argue that the fight should not change. As Lucas says: “The feast of Saint Sebastian has been declared an intangible heritage. If the party collapses, everything involved cannot be changed”. Because, according to the interviewee, this would lead to a cultural loss in the sport.

Various martial arts have undergone a process of sportivization that has put the “traditional” on one side and the “sport” on the other into debate, an example being Okinawa Karate vs. Japanese/sports karate. Okinawans and other supporters of a traditional authenticity of the art, such as Budô, for example, argue that sports karate does not prepare the practitioner for a real-life situation, placing self-defense as the main function of a martial art. This problematization occurs in various areas of martial arts, modern martial arts, and combat sports. It is possible to observe these discussions in vernacular martial arts, especially in the Marajoara Wrestling, which is in a transition process between vernacular and combat sport. Given the institutionalization of other modalities, such as Wushu, Karate and Taekwondo (Sun Zha, 2016; Martins & Kanashiro, 2016; Capener, 2016), Seabra et al. (2020) point out possible situations that Marajoara Wrestling may experience in its institutionalization process, based on correlations with the sportivization processes of other fighting systems. As in the case of capoeira, which is undergoing a reconfiguration that prioritizes technicality and physical conditioning, leaving historicity and playfulness in the background, since they do not play a relevant role for sportivization.

With the process of social valorization, whether through the impact on religious festivities, or more recently through the rise and international fame of islanders in professional fighting modalities such as the UFC, there is a process of institutionalization of *Agarrada* that has changed its status as a vernacular martial art. Today, there is an initiative to institutionalize the rules that detail the blows in order to standardize the events and the judgments of the fighting systems, avoiding random and arbitrary criteria. Thus, the formalization of training begins with the need to adapt fighters to the rules, preventing them from using unauthorized movements that would disqualify them, for example. The officialization of fighting systems and competitions, organized by entities such as the Paraense Federation of Marajoara Wrestling and the Brazilian Marajoara Wrestling League, a dissident organization from the former due to disagreements regarding certain rules, guarantees the granting of titles and social recognition that did not exist before, being relegated to the fame of those who became known for their victories over other practitioners. At the same time, this has encouraged the formalization of teaching and training, as well as exams and degrees, both for practitioners and teachers, as well as for referees. However, this systematization does not eliminate the suspicion that evolution in fighting does not only depend on good teaching, but also on something previous, natural to the fighter: “We do, like, Marajoara Wrestling training on the beach, [...] I always say, 'look, this is already in your blood, you will learn. But I don't know if you'll have the same evolution that I had” (Francisco). This speech is also repeated by the political leaders of the island: “There is a comrade, a former mayor, who says that the Marajoara Wrestling is in his blood. It's in the blood. Every child of the sixties⁶, every man, every woman, every child knew how to fight” (Carlos).

Old practitioners say, who are older people and who practiced the *Agarrada* before it became a Marajoara Wrestling: “*Agarrada* is not exercised, *agarrada* is fought”. For the inhabitants of the Ilha de Marajó, after disagreements over the rules of a tournament, Antônio reports that he could not stop himself from participating again, even though he had warned that he would quit: “I said no, that I

⁶ A time when the Marajoara population was still predominantly linked to the countryside and rural life (Souza, 2021).



would not fight there anymore, but as I like it, I always go. No way, it's in my blood". For the islanders, the fight is part of the identity of this region and speaks louder than setbacks and the choice between fighting or not. This understanding of the fight as something characteristic of those born on the island is present in almost all the interviews. "Francisco" uses the term "gift" to define this thing that is in the blood: "Marajoara Wrestling is already in our blood, we are born with this gift, there is no need to train". Fighting has manifested itself naturally since childhood, with the practice being present even without formalized training: "I discovered that it was already in my blood, as I told you, I started when I was seven years old, because I was already fighting a lot and no one was training me". This idea is passed down from generation to generation through the region's own oral tradition: "Like my father said, you have a gift for grappling. It's in your blood."

Maintaining identity and the experience of "being in the blood" refers to everyday and generational experiences: fighting on the beach, everyday life, living with those who fight. But why can systematized training contradict "being in the blood"? The reports refer to a dimension in which living the world of life specific to the grip and its practitioners and the experience of practicing the same intersect: living the world, everyday life, others, involves, on some level, living the grip itself in its various facets. This is what sustains identity and values, it is in their genesis. Institutionalization separates the fight from its everyday life and inevitably changes it: the fight is no longer projected towards this original world of life, but towards the wider world (globalization). Here, it is the loss of this world of life in the fight/of the fight in this world of life that defines the constitutive horizon of this experience of institutionalization: there is a certain reality of the fight "real fight" that is lost, with its risks, dangers, situations and challenges that are unique to it. This is the genesis of identity, the category of "blood" condenses all these experiences. It is possible to see this question of identity of the fight in capoeira, the sea horse and the rural maracatu (Valério, 2021). Where the possibility of risking one's life is something fundamental to the experience of the practice itself.

Such passages transform the very real risk of life into a singularly playful circumstance, intensifying the experience of play on the margins of death. If the practice of *vadiar*⁷ in capoeira is limited to the realm of make-believe in its blows, then its peak as a game occurs precisely at this limit, where the intensity of the fun is heightened when dealing with or evading a well-aimed blow that, if successful, would cause as much damage as if it had been inflicted in an open fight. In an open fight, the experience of challenge and the experience of play merge into a single, intense pleasure. This pleasure is derived from the sensation of danger at varying intensities. The sensitivity to strategy is comparable to the sensitivity to danger, as it is a potential source of creative fulfillment, escape, creation, or protection. It is appealing that this force transcends the subject's deliberations, as it is already present in the body's movements, which are driven by the desire to escape danger with pleasure and joy. (Valério, 2021, p. 213)

3.3. Marajoara Wrestling versus "Agarrada"

The sport is currently undergoing a period of transition from a vernacular martial art to an attempt at institutionalization. This transition could potentially lead it to becoming a combat sport or even a modern martial art. There are agents who seek institutionalization as a combat sports modality, as evidenced by the establishment of the Paraense Marajoara Wrestling Federation in 2020. The primary concern in this new process in Marajoara Wrestling is the question of institutionalization, which raises the issue of preserving the values of traditional fighting. This dilemma arises when the notion of modernity is imposed ideologically, resulting in the following: "its project on the other and on reality itself, (...) always presenting a strong colonizing and, in many cases, violent tendency" (Mahfoud & Massimi, 2012). Modernization processes often project onto local cultures a civilizing model that operates in a colonizing manner, erasing authentic experiences and traditional ways of living and fighting. In the case of *Agarrada*, what is at stake is not only the adoption of sporting rules and norms, but the reconfiguration of a practice that once emerged organically from the daily lives of the people of Marajó. The replacement of lived experiences by a regulatory, standardized logic that is external to local ways of life reveals a tendency toward symbolic

⁷A term from capoeira that refers to the free and spontaneous practice of the game of capoeira, generally performed outside of a strictly technical or competitive context. It would be poorly translated as loafing, since it does not designate the sense of *vadiar* described in the quote, which is why we chose to keep the original version.



expropriation. Thus, the resistance of older practitioners can be interpreted as a gesture of safeguarding against the cultural homogenization imposed by this colonizing bias of modernity.

It is evident that there is a degree of discontent among older practitioners regarding the changes that have occurred within the sport as a result of its process of sportivization. Pedro discusses aspects of modern Marajoara Wrestling and contrasts it with traditional *Agarrada*. In this comparison, he emphasizes the nature of the traditional *Agarrada*. Additionally, he notes that a few individuals engage in this style of fighting, namely rural workers who were not influenced by sportization. In the same excerpt, Pedro notes that the culture of fighting has been entirely transformed:

It was so fast that one boy would knock over the other, right? It was incredible! But today there is none of that. Now it's different. There are still two or three boys who fight, who are from farms, who are used to fighting, really the real Marajoara Wrestling. They're so skilled! 'Let me take it, I'm smart, just defend yourself from here, there, jump to the side, come on'. But today the guy wants to hold his arm⁸. Oh, there was nothing like that! Now they have already invented these things, and we are old people, from farms, those used to fighting. I was talking to a colleague and looking at the fight, and he said, "Boy, they totally changed our culture. Whoever teaches kids today, I don't think he's ever fought in his life.

In this context, Flávio reports on the distinction between the Traditional *Agarrada* and the modern LM, with a particular focus on the description of the Traditional techniques, which represent the correct way to practice the modality, since, for him, the current fight should not be called the Marajoara Wrestling. In this context, he addresses a specific subject, which is "passing," which is a technique to unbalance the opponent. This technique is employed as a defensive maneuver against any blow, when the fighter has regained his balance and has successfully maneuvered the opponent out of his range of action. The moment the fighter loses his balance and is on the verge of falling to the ground, he reverses the position, taking his opponent out of his range of action. According to Flávio, he observed a situation in which this throw was executed. However, due to the athlete's soiled shoulder blades, the individual who delivered the blow was penalized with a loss, despite being the active agent in the situation. This was because, even though he was the initiator of the action, he would be disqualified for placing his back on the ground:

The older people know, but they don't go back anymore. So there are no new people anymore... there are very few, about two or three, who really imitate *Agarrada*, there is a dark-skinned boy who fighting systems on the farm, who is already used to it. He stays there, tries to defend himself, and falls apart. That's really the fight, because that's the way it has to be. Nowadays, if you throw yourself in the dirt, they say you're disqualified. The guy who threw himself and passed the other guy to stay on top. I was discussing this there one day. But the guy didn't fall, it was the boy who took action and passed him to get on top. Ah, but he touched his back! For me it's no, it's a shame for us. This is no longer the Marajoara Wrestling.

In the context of globalization, the preserved martial arts, which were once sources of national or ethnic pride, were separated from their original communities. These are translated for a larger audience than the local one, transforming the art into something different from the original. However, there are local efforts to attempt preservation without the slightest distortion. In accordance with the cautionary advice offered by Mahfoud and Massimi (2012, p. 62), it is prudent to avoid polarizing the two processes of civilization and culture. Consequently, the significant challenge is to achieve a balance between globalization and preservation, ensuring that the AMVs are not merely a vehicle for global expansion but rather a means of perpetuating their knowledge, which is typically transmitted orally and informally. In the contemporary context, the means of transmission that have traditionally sustained AMVs are among the most endangered forms of intangible cultural heritage.

At the inaugural Paraense Marajoara Wrestling Forum, held in the city of Belém, one of the key themes discussed by researchers and practitioners was tradition. The authors presented a range of topics, including the history and genesis of the sport, the preservation of culture, nomenclature,

⁸ Some of the more experienced practitioners argue that a *Agarrada* does not involve immobilization techniques or holds on the upper limbs, only on the legs. It is by grabbing the opponent's legs that one would bring them down to the ground.

religion, techniques, and others. There is a significant concern about the institutionalization of the fight and the potential impact on these traditions (Green, 2020). One can assume the existence of an inclination to read the context, as would be implicit in Green (2020) concern, based on the division between traditional authenticity, reflecting an original (static?) culture, and modernity. The latter threatens to distort tradition through institutionalization (or globalization, in the term used by Green), preventing its preservation. Even if we do not attempt to resume the long and winding debate about the one-way “acculturation” implicit in this duality, it is worth mentioning the position taken in it by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, for whom the following is true: “Precisely because they participate in a global process of acculturation, the people’s “localities” continue to distinguish themselves from each other in the specific ways in which they do so” (Sahlins, 1997, p. 57).

4. Final considerations

It is evident that the mere knowledge of these AMVs does not serve the purpose of institutionalizing and modernizing them. From an anthropological point of view, this would result in the inadvertent expropriation of these cultural practices by a civilizational project. In the context of the ongoing research program, the necessity for a study on alterity (in the register of a psychology of culture) is assumed. This is manifested in a bodily practice with regard to its correlates of meaning and attitude (psychology of sport), using an analytical perspective that seeks to retrace the lived experiences and phenomena that structure the practice in its context (phenomenological archaeology). In the context of physical education, this characteristic, which extends beyond the boundaries of a single disciplinary domain, represents a methodological aspect that the authors of the ICM (International Center of martial arts) report have identified as a significant challenge in the consolidation of knowledge in martial arts: “The need for interdisciplinary studies entangled with the complexities in ascertaining the identity of martial arts has contributed to the incompleteness of extant research in this field”. (Green, 2012, p. 12) By outlining the general identification of the object based on reports and field trips, it is possible to observe important aspects for understanding the modality. Among the most notable aspects is the potential to observe the transition of this practice from a vernacular to an institutionalized context. This transition is evident when considering the experiences of both older and contemporary practitioners, who illustrate fundamental differences between generations, but primarily between the ways in which this practice is lived. There are members of the younger generation who, although in the minority, have incorporated *Agarrada* into their practices within the context of the Marajó archipelago.

Green’s (2012) study was fundamental to consolidating the notion of vernacular martial arts, but scientific production in the area has advanced significantly since then. Today, there are a greater number of journals, academic networks, and international conferences dedicated to research on martial arts, indicating an increase in interest and methodological sophistication in the field. Works such as that of Michael Ryan on the Venezuelan *Juego de Garrote* exemplify this new wave of studies, by articulating ethnography, oral history, and political analysis to understand the local dynamics of preservation and transformation (Ryan, 2019). This renewed panorama invites us to situate Luta Marajoara in dialogue with other Latin American vernacular experiences, understanding its challenges and potential in light of a transnational network of knowledge and resistance.

According to Giddens (1991), modernity continually reconfigures the identity of individuals through processes of social disembedding and reembedding, displacing local practices from their original contexts and reinserting them into global structures. In the case of Marajoara Wrestling, institutionalization does not occur only as a technical formalization, but as a symbolic displacement: from *Agarrada* as a practice rooted in everyday life to a “sports product” inserted into broader circuits of visibility and regulation. This displacement has repercussions on the identity of practitioners, who need to rebuild their relationship with the fighting system amidst new meanings attributed to it. The dialectic between tradition and modernity, therefore, becomes a privileged terrain for thinking about identity construction in times of globalization.

This research initiative is aligned with the principles of the International Center of martial arts for Youth Development and Engagement (ICM-UNESCO). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is dedicated to contributing to global peace,



sustainable development, and security through the promotion of international collaboration. ICM is a network of experts that can be called upon by the Secretary-General to provide assistance and support for the planning and implementation of the Center's projects. The production of knowledge, which was highlighted as a significant gap in the article, could provide valuable insights that could inform the development of policies that impact public educational practices at the national and international levels.

The study of the phenomena present in Marajoara Wrestling has illuminated the tensions inherent in the modality's institutionalization process. Thus, while in the sporting way of practicing Marajoara Wrestling, the means used for an interventional and educational role in the fight can be highlighted, which is of interest applied both in Physical Education and in Sports Psychology; in relation to the traditional *Agarrada*, the understandings of the present study are of anthropological interest and of record of the social processes through which the fight goes through today. This article contributes to the ongoing debate on the social processes that originate from *Agarrada*, as well as the specific interventional-educational activities that are unique to it. It aims to elucidate the role of Physical Education and Sports Psychology within this context. Furthermore, the anthropological and phenomenological perspectives can reveal the structuring potential and effectiveness of the grasp, for example, as active agents, innovative and critical sources in an epistemic, educational, and political sense, different from those effective in the institutionalized version. Consequently, in a reciprocal and horizontal critique between tradition and institutionalization, which is being revisited in an innovative manner.

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