

# What is the Caipora (to you)?

Polyphonic mixed-method ethnography of the Caipora forest being and the process of interpretation in cross-cultural dialogue.

Julia J. Turska



## Background

Caipora is a spirit and a forest being, a herdsman of the wilderness, and a significant agent in the regulation of the usage of natural resources. In this empirical philosophy project, we observe the presence and the practices related to the Caipora to reflect on the process of interpretation in cross-cultural dialogue. The ethnographic research presented on the poster describes multiple perspectives on the Caipora narrative, from the members of the traditional fishing community of Siribinha, Bahia, Brazil, to the researcher working in the community (author).

## Objective

- Using mixed methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, autoethnography and phenomenological interviews, describe the Caipora in a polyphonic manner.
- Philosophically reflect on how the ontological, the belief-based and the embodiment-oriented views on alterity are reflected in competing interpretations of the observed instance of radical cultural difference between Caipora-present and Caipora-absent ontological frameworks.

## Results

### Ethnography

The Caipora is present in the communities' narratives and daily practices.



Figure 1. Caipora: illustration from children's book



Figure 2. Mangrove, Siribinha, BA, Brazil



Figure 3. In some accounts, Caipora has reversed feet

"There was another time that we were in Boca do Rio, which is in Poças, me, Goi (friend) and other people, we were leaving (returning from Poças to Siribinha), I told my friend: Go, Goi go, go! (let's go) and I talked to her, and she stood still, I said: Let's go, the boat is here, come! And she looked at the bush and went away (in the direction of the bush). And we were chatting (her and the other people) and looking at her, **she couldn't see the boat**, then we got in the boat and went towards her, we had to stop the boat, and someone went towards her in order to stop her (and lead her to get in the boat with everyone)."

(semi-structured interview with participant #4)

"That is the thing about the mangrove. It is so dense and intensely patterned that it is very hard to locate oneself in the space, and easy to lose your companions somewhere in the labyrinth. I sat in stillness and sang to the crabs. I was finally getting a hang of it when I realized I could no longer see Gabi, but thankfully Esther was still there. How scary and how easy it would be to get lost in the mangrove. I joined Esther and together we made our way to the river and decided to wait for the others by the boat. We called them, making sure not to use their names. Many times, **we thought we had heard them nearby, but they weren't there in fact.**"

(autoethnography, participant observation in a crab-catching expedition)

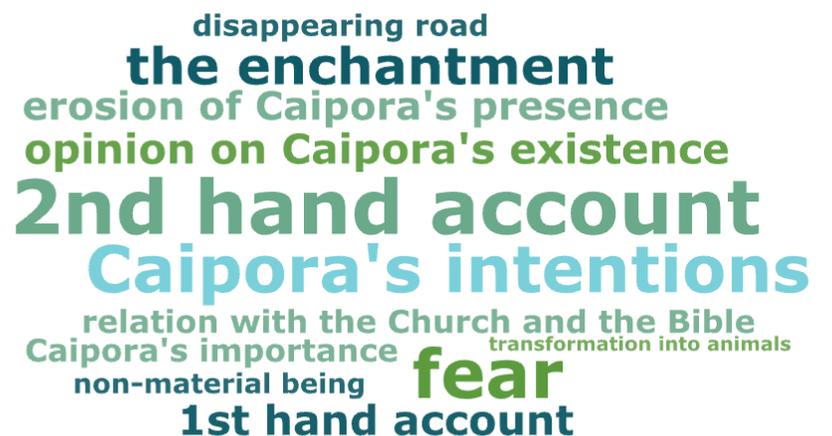


Figure 4. Category analysis' word cloud (based on semi-structured interviews with 7 participants, February 2022)

### Philosophical analysis

It is difficult to explain how people can understand each other, coming from a philosophical attitude of ontological radical alterity between collectives across various dimensions of difference, given that in fact, as was empirically studied in this project, common ground in face of deep difference can be achieved. At the same time, interpretation which starts from a point of view about the spirit as a belief (something not necessarily *real*) would distort the intention of the interviewee.

## Conclusions

- While its salience has certainly eroded over time, Caipora remains a well-known presence in the mangroves surrounding Siribinha.
- When listening to the whispers of the mangrove, even though we explain them differently, we experience the same thing. And this sameness is the basis of our understanding of each other.
- Cross cultural interpretation is a relational act, where co-experiencing plays a key role.

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