AN ILLUSTRATED INTRODUCTION TO CAPOEIRA: AN EXPRESSION OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN CULTURE

By Guido Ambroso

Old masters playing capoeira (Angola style) in Salvador Bahia in the late 1960s (archive Jair Moura)

1. Introduction

What is capoeira? Capoeira is a martial art created by Brazilians of African descent. But capoeira is much more than a fight. It is also dance, music, singing in Portuguese, acrobatics, improvised poetry and even pantomime. It is best described as an expression of Afro-Brazilian culture. Capoeira is over 200 years old and was widely practiced in the 19th century in the streets of Brazilian cities such as Rio de Janeiro. But in 1890 it was outlawed as a social disease practiced by black criminals and was almost eradicated by the Brazilian police.

Fortunately, it survived in Bahia¹ where the capoeira practitioners, known as capoeiristas, stressed the musical and dancing aspects to conceal the martial side. In fact capoeira is now played to the sound of live instruments of African origin such as the berimbau, a bow with a metal string and calabash which sets the rhythm and the style of playing in the capoeira circle, called roda. Other instruments are drums of African origin and the tambourine. In the 1930s capoeira was legalized and started evolving in two slightly different styles, namely Capoeira Angola (the so-called “traditional” style, systematized by Mestre Pastinha) and Capoeira Regional (the “modern” style developed by Mestre Bimba), but until the 1970s it was still marginalized and stigmatized as an activity of black and mulatto street thugs from Salvador Bahia.

¹ Note that Bahia is a regional state in the north-east of the Federal Republic of Brazil, whose capital is Salvador. However sometimes people refer to Salvador as “Bahia” or “Salvador Bahia”. We shall use “Bahia” to refer to the state and “Salvador Bahia” to refer to the city.
² In Portuguese “Mestre” means “Master”.

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Since then capoeira experienced a true boom, first all over Brazil, and then abroad. By now, there are over 4 million capoeiristas and thousands of masters and instructors from all social classes all over Brazil. And since the 1980s capoeira started spreading in the USA and in Western Europe and it estimated that it is now practiced in over 100 countries worldwide. Even US President Barack Obama was treated with a capoeira demonstration when he visited the favela (shanty town) of Cidade de Deus (“City of God”) in Rio de Janeiro in March 2011. This paper aims at providing a short introduction to the historical roots and evolution of capoeira in its social context.

2. African roots

There is little doubt that there is a strong link between capoeira and Africa, but the exact nature of this connection and the date of capoeira’s emergence in Brazil has been the subject of many debates and even the etymology of the word is uncertain. While most scholars argue that it probably derives from a word in the native Indian language Tupi Guarani referring to an area of forest that had been cleared by burning or cutting down and where fugitive slaves could hide and practice their fighting skills, others claim that it could originate from the word kipura from the Kikongo African language, a term used to describe a rooster's movements in a fight. According to folkloric tradition, capoeira was first developed and practiced in the Quilombos, the communities of fugitive slaves in the interior of northeast Brazil, such as the Quilombo dos Palmares which held out against Portuguese and Dutch colonialists in the region of Alagoas from 1605 to 1694. The leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares, Zumbi, is often considered to have been a capoeira master or even the first capoeirista and today there are many capoeiristas with the nickname “Zumbi”. However, there is no evidence to support this theory. Other scholars and capoeiristas, particularly from the Angola style, argue that capoeira derives from Ngolo, a fighting dance from a Bantu tribe in southern Angola and that it arrived in Brazil in more or less ready made much later, in the early 19th century.

While there is evidence substantiating the link with the Ngolo from Angola, capoeira has undergone a number of transformations and the capoeira of the 20th and 21st centuries as we know it is certainly different from the one of the 19th century. Furthermore, apart from the Bantu slaves from Angola and the Congo, there were also slaves who originated from West Africa, such as the Yoruba from Nigeria and Benin. The influence of Yoruba culture is very strong on Afro-Brazilian religions (Candomblé from Bahia and Umbanda and Quimbanda, popularly known as Macumba, from Rio) and music. Another important ethnic group in Brazil was the Muslim Hausa from Northern Nigeria and Northern Benin who were sought after (but difficult to obtain) as slaves for their intelligence, beauty and cheerfulness. According to a historian, “when in the 19th century many Hausas were, for internal African reasons, imported into Brazil, the incidence of slave revolts greatly increased”. One of the cultural manifestations of some sections of the Hausa is a very violent fist-fight called Dambe that includes a couple kicks that resemble those of capoeira.

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Another reason why we think that the modern capoeira that emerged in Bahia in the 1930s may have had a strong influence from Angola, but included also inputs from other parts of Africa and was eventually “mixed” in Brazil, was the absence of the berimbau, as can be seen from the capoeira scenes of the first two paintings from the early 19th century shown below. The only musical instrument that appears in one painting is a drum similar to the atabaque of modern capoeira whose central instrument, in both Angola and Regional styles, is however the berimbau. These paintings also show a rather violent form of capoeira with few recognizable moves in the first one, but in the second one, the kick is a typical capoeira kick called chapa de frente or benção. The arrival of the police is also indicative of a capoeira scene of the early 19th century.

["Jogar Capuêra ou Dance de la Guerre" (To play capoeira or war dance), RUGENDAS, J.M. Voyage pittoresque et historique dans le Brasil. Paris: Engelmann et Cie, Paris, 1834].

["Negros lutando, Brazil" (Negroes fighting, Brazil) Augustus Earle, 1822]
The following painting, from the same period, shows that the *berimbau*, that has such a central role in modern capoeira, actually originated from a different tradition, namely that of story-telling which in west Africa was performed by the *griots*, a social group of wandering historians, poets, bards and musicians who were the repositories of oral traditions. They remind Homer in ancient Greece, who travelled with an assistant and with a harp telling epical stories. It appears that this tradition merged with capoeira only much later, at the end of the 19th century, in Bahia (as opposed to Rio) when capoeira was outlawed and transformed itself into a quasi-dance to conceal the martial aspects. The *berimbau* was the instrument that would signal if the police was coming so that the players could immediately show that they were only dancing and not fighting.

[“Escravo velho tocando berimbau” (Old slave playing berimbau); DEBRET. Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil. Paris: Didot Firmin et Frères, 1824.]


The first written reference to capoeira appears in Rio de Janeiro (the new capital of Brazil since 1763) at the end of the 18th century when “a lieutenant of the police forces, João Moreira, know by some as “Amotinado” (the mutineer) who maybe was the first capoeirista in Rio de Janeiro because, even if he was a very good swordsman, he preferred head-butts and kicks”\(^5\). Head-butts and kicks are definitely recognizable features of modern capoeira. Actually, *Amotinado* was not the only police official who practiced capoeira in the 19th century. This is rather paradoxical because most of the references to capoeira in the 19th century are in the context of black *capoeiristas* arrested by the police. Even if the first Brazilian Criminal Code of 1830 did not single out capoeiristas, they were in practice identified with vagabonds, beggars and members of gangs of bandits. As a result in the 19th century capoeiristas were systematically

\(^5\) Guilherme Frazão Conduru, “As Metamorfoses da Capoeira”, in *Textos do Brasil* N. 14, Ministerio da Relações Exteriores
persecuted by law enforcement officials. Even if the first written records about capoeira placed it in an urban, rather than rural, context, the paintings above suggest that, at least in its formative period, a “proto-capoeira” might have first emerged in rural areas.

During that period, most capoeiristas were members of a dozen malas or street-gangs that terrorized the outskirts of the expanding city of Rio de Janeiro. All these malas had distinctive names (as modern days gangs) and were controlling specific neighbourhoods of the city. In the mid 19th century, some outstanding capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro became legendary figures such as Manduca da Praia, known for his fighting skills, agility and self-confident and elegant style. Contrary to other capoeiristas of that period, he did not hang out with the members of the malas but was a bit of a loner and used to earn his living by selling fish in a stand. He was credited with knocking out with his bare hands and feet a group of a dozen gypsies armed with sticks and underwent as many as 27 trials for having caused bodily harm, from which he always managed to be absolved.

Between 1864 and 1870, many capoeiristas joined the Brazilian army to fight in the War of Paraguay (or “War of the Triple Alliance”), an event still remembered in capoeira songs. In this war, the combined forces of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, supported by Great Britain and France, attacked Paraguay (whose ruler had attempted to resist the trade policies of the Great Powers) and exterminated up to 90% of the male population, in one of history’s forgotten genocides. For marginalized capoeiristas – however – having participated in this war which is part of Brazilian history is a source of pride while the massacres of Paraguayans are not mentioned in capoeira songs.

In the late 1880s several capoeiristas became members of the Guarda Negra (Black Guard) of Princess Isabel, the daughter of Dom Pedro II, the “Emperor” of Brazil, but in practice a constitutional monarch. She had liberal opinions concerning the abolition of slavery, agrarian reform and women’s right to vote. In 1888, acting as regent for Emperor Pedro II, Princess Isabel signed the Lei Aurea (“Golden Law”), a decree that finally abolished slavery in Brazil. As a result, the loyalty of the capoeiristas of the Guarda Negra towards Princess Isabel increased and capoeiristas often intervened to break-up the gatherings of sympathizers of the republic who wanted to overthrow the monarchy.

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6 Ibid.
7 King Pedro I of Portugal, father of Pedro II, was forced to leave Portugal in 1808 during the Napoleonic wars and settled in Brazil.
4. Repression and marginalization (approximately 1890-1930)

In 1889 the Brazilian monarchy was replaced the republic in what actually amounted to a military *coup d’etat* that was carried out mainly as a reaction to the abolition of slavery. The new regime considered *capoeiristas* in general and the Black Guard in particular as dangerous not only from a social point of view, but also from a political point of view because of their loyalty to the monarchy and Princess Isabel. The stage was set for the most brutal repression that capoeira had to face until that time that brought it almost to extinction. Article 402 (“On Vagabonds and Capoeiristas”) of the new 1890 Penal Code of the Republic of Brazil stipulated that “to display on the streets body agility and dexterity known as capoeira and to use instruments capable of causing bodily harm … is liable to the sentence of two to six months in prison. An aggravating circumstance is to belong to gangs or *maltas*. The chiefs will have the sentence doubled”.

At this juncture the leader of the new Brazilian Republic, Marshal Fonseca, appointed a new chief of Police, Dr. Sampaio Ferraz, who unleashed an extremely violent persecution against street gangs and groups of *capoeiristas* in Rio de Janeiro, killing, imprisoning and even deporting them to remote places. One of them was the island of Noronha, where up to 600 *capoeiristas* were held in prison. Incidentally, Sampaio Ferraz was also an amateur *capoeirista* like João Moreira “Amotinado” over one century before. By that time *capoeiristas* included not only blacks and mulattos, but also persons of European descent (particularly Portuguese) from middle class backgrounds. However, by the 1920s, capoeira was almost completely eradicated from Rio de Janeiro. The sketches below show that the capoeira practiced at the end of the 19th century was a violent urban street-fight in which the use of the razor as an offensive weapon was quite common. On the other hand, there was still no sign of the *berimbau* in capoeira, at least in Rio.

![Sketches of capoeira](image)

[Kalixto, 1906: “Meter ou Andante”, “A Rasteira”, “A Lamparina”]

Fortunately, capoeira survived in Bahia in spite of the repression led by the chief of police of Bahia, Pedrito de Azevedo Gordilho. According to Mestre Nestor, capoeira in Bahia was sociologically more related to the Afro-Brazilian cult, *candomblé*, than to street gangs as in Rio. We may add that since the capital city was moved from Salvador Bahia to Rio de Janeiro in 1763, the attention of the authorities to potential social and political disorder was more focused on the new capital than the old one.

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8 Guilherme Frazão Conduru, *op. cit.*

Around this time that is in the 1920s another capoeirista became legendary and is still today the subject of many capoeira songs. Manoel Henrique Pereira, nicknamed Besouro Preto (“Black Beetle”) de Mangangá, was born in the city Santo Amaro de Purificação, in the state of Bahia in 1885 and became one of the most famous capoeirista ever. He was a good man who worked in a warehouse and delivered merchandise throughout Bahia, but was also a valentão (“tough guy”, “boaster”) who fought very frequently with the police and challenged anyone who was well-known, or who could increase his reputation, that is other “valentões”, including from the police. Although Besouro was a real life historical character (again the proof of his existence was found in police records) he became a mythical figure apparently endowed with super-human powers such as that of vanishing and flying away (particularly from the police) and of having corpo fechado (“closed body” which bullets could not penetrate). He died relatively young at the age of 39 under mysterious circumstances (according to the legend he was stabbed with a knife made from a special wood that could penetrate his skin).

At this time the archetype of the capoeirista was no longer only that of the boastful tough guy, the valentão, but also that of the malandro, the cunning street-wise kid which was later immortalized in many samba songs such as those of the great Brazilian composer and singer Chico Buarque. Chico’s songs drew inspiration from “Mac the Knife”, the leading character of Bertold Brecht’s “Three Penny Opera”. Malandragem, that is cunningness, deception and surprise, became one of the most important qualities of capoeiristas, which sets capoeira apart from other martial arts based on honour and strict rules. The malandro’s weapon of choice was still the razor and, more rarely, the knife. Another expression often associated with capoeira is mandinga, which means “magic” or “spell”, a term derived from the once powerful Mandingo people, which nowadays strand across several countries in West Africa from Senegal to Niger, known for their magical powers. If a capoeirista is called mandinguero it is a big compliment meaning that he has an inner power to dominate the game and play capoeira in a cunning way.

By the 1920s there were two forms of capoeira practiced in Bahia. One very violent such as the one practiced by Besouro that was the continuation of the capoeira carioca (i.e. from Rio de Janeiro) of the 19th century and which was vanishing because of repression. The other was a more playful form, at times practiced in parties or festivals, which included several musical instruments such as the berimbau and even the guitar. It is around this period a the beginning of the 20th century after the abolition of slavery and not, as often mistakenly assumed, during the time of slavery, that capoeira transformed itself from a violent fight into a mixture of dance, music and martial art in which the musical instruments and the dancing steps were used to conceal the martial elements. In fact, the berimbau which, as we have seen, came from the tradition of story-telling that had nothing to do with capoeira, was probably introduced to warn the capoeiristas that the police was coming. Even today there is a toque (rhythm) of the berimbau called cavallaria (mounted police) used to signal to the capoeiristas to hurry up and stop because the police was coming. From the early 1920s the berimbau started setting the pace and tempo of capoeira contests.
5. Modern capoeira: the “Golden Age” in Bahia (approximately 1930-70)

By the early 1930s there was a number of capoeiristas who acquired a certain fame in Bahia apart from Besouro Preto, such as Totonho de Marê, Samuel Querido de Deus (“Loved by God”), Amorzinho, Cobrinha Verde (“Little Green Snake”) and Daniel Noronha. But two characters towered above everyone else: Mestre Bimba, who developed a new style called Capoeira Regional and Mestre Pastinha, who became the leader of what was considered the more “traditional” form of capoeira, Capoeira Angola. Followers of Regional and Angola idolatize the two masters to such an extent that it becomes difficult to even talk about them in an objective, dispassionate way. Both started capoeira very young and were taught by capoeiristas of African origin in the streets (there were no capoeira schools or academies at that time). Although Pastinha was ten years older than Bimba, Bimba became a very famous capoeirista before Pastinha.


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\(^{10}\) Many capoeiristas are known by their nicknames (“apelidos”). It is said that this tradition comes from the times of repression given that if the police was trying to enquire about some capoeiristas they would only be known by their nicknames and not by their real names. However not all capoeiristas have nicknames.
Like many capoeiristas before him, Bimba had problems with the police whom he fought with capoeira techniques as reported in the newspaper article reproduced above. According to his students, in the early ‘30s Bimba thought that capoeira had become a little bit too sloppy and too much of a dance and wanted to reinvigorate it as a martial art. Hence, he started teaching capoeira introducing some new movements and kicks. He also developed a formal training method, including gymnastics, and sequences of movements and kicks (sequências) since up to that time capoeira was mainly learned in the streets by watching masters playing capoeira, and a graduation system.

Recent research suggests that he might have been influenced by a capoeirista from Rio, Annibal Burlamaqui. However, Mestre Bimba can still be considered not only an innovator, but also the master who managed to lift capoeira out of marginality and to get official recognition. In fact, at the beginning of the ‘30s, in order to attract practitioners from the middle class and to avoid problems with the authorities, he called his style “Luta Regional Baiana” (regional fight from Bahia) without even using the word “capoeira”. In 1936 he also challenged capoeiristas and other martial artists to fight him in the ring in a theatre in Salvador Bahia with what could be called full-contact rules and emerged victorious from four matches. In 1937 Bimba finally managed to get state recognition for his Luta Regional that could be henceforth be called Capoeira Regional and he and his students performed a demonstration before the President of Brazil, Getúlio Vargas, who was a nationalist and therefore sensitive to a national fight and artistic expression such as capoeira. Capoeira was finally legalized after almost 50 years in the Brazilian Penal Code but, in spite of the fact that Mestre Bimba managed to attract many students from a white, middle class background, it still remained relatively marginalized and practiced almost exclusively in Bahia until the late 1960s.

Mestre Pastinha (Vincente Ferreira Pastinha, 1889-1981)

11 who in 1928 wrote a book called Gymnastica Nacional (Capoeiragem) Methodizada e Regrada (National Gymnastics – Capoeira – with Methods and Rules)
12 Among Mestre Bimba’s numerous “graduates” in Bahia we may quote Ângelo Augusto Decânio (medical doctor), Jair Moura (who wrote books and was a pioneer in filming capoeira) and Camisa Roxa (“Red Shirt”), who initiated to capoeira his younger brother Camisa (founder of the influential Abadá group), Acordeon and Miguel.
Mestre Pastinha learned capoeira at a very young age in Salvador Bahia and practiced with famous masters of his period. Capoeira in those days at the turn of the century was still the violent form practiced by Besouro Preto and many others. At the age of twenty, Mestre Pastinha worked as a bouncer in a casino and stated that he, as a professional capoeirista, would always have with himself at least a small knife\textsuperscript{13} and, like Mestre Bimba, often fought with the police. From 1920, he temporarily abandoned capoeira and was engaged for 20 years in different activities as a painter, football player and docker. It was only in 1940 when he became the director of the Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola that he turned into a true leader of capoeira Angola, the supposedly more “traditional” form of capoeira (as opposed to the “new” capoeira Regional practiced by Mestre Bimba and his students). He took over the Centre from a famous capoeirista called Amorzinho, another in the long tradition of police officers who were also capoeiristas, which started with Amotinado at the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

Pastinha was keen to clear capoeira from the stigma of belonging only to thugs and criminals and emphasized more than Bimba the ritual and musical aspects, while trying to preserve its martial character, but more as defence than attack. His personal charm and agility while playing capoeira attracted not only many young capoeiristas, but also some intellectuals such as the great Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado who was a close friend and supported of Mestre Pastinha financially, and the painter and sculptor Carybé. In 1966, together with some of his students, Mestre Pastinha traveled to Dakar in Senegal, to present capoeira in the first International Festival of Black Arts (“Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres”), initiated by President Léopold Senghor, in which also famous personalities such as André Malraux, Duke Ellington and Joséphine Baker participated. Pastinha’s capoeira school in the heart of the Pelourinho, the historical centre of Salvador Bahia, was a very famous place in the city. After his death in 1981 as a poor and blind man, some of his students, particularly Mestres João Pequeno and João Grande (“Little John” and “Big John”), became the custodians of the new capoeira orthodoxy.

Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha were rivals and their styles of capoeira (including dressing codes) differed. While Regional emphasized more the martial aspects and formal training, Angola emphasized more the ritual and musical side, stressing cunningness and

\textsuperscript{13} As reported in a good book by Antonio Liberac Cardoso Simões Pires: \textit{Bimba, Pastinha e Besouro de Magangá, Tres personagens da capoeira baiana}, 2002, Fundação Universidade de Tocantins
deception instead of speed and power. Nevertheless, they shared some common characteristics (such as many moves and the role of the berimbau) and respected each other. Both learned the old violent street capoeira at an early age and had occasional fights with the police, but then tried to lift capoeira from marginality and endow it with dignity and respectability while keeping its martial aspects. Bimba managed to involve white middle class practitioners (including doctors and lawyers) and to get support (or at least tolerance) from politicians, while Pastinha managed to get recognition from intellectuals and artist. Both tried to codify its moves, music, rituals (more marked in the Angola style) and uniforms. Both died as poor and relatively marginal figures except in the capoeira milieu, but the enormous boom that capoeira enjoyed first in Brazil and then throughout the world after their deaths is a testament that their projects succeed beyond their wildest dreams. As the evangelical dictum goes, “nemo propheta in patria” (“nobody is a prophet in his homeland”).


In the early 1970s, capoeira appeared to be in a state of decline, particularly in Bahia. In 1973, Mestre Bimba left Salvador Bahia and went to teach in the city of Goiania, hoping in greater recognition and better economic opportunities, but was severely disappointed and died one year later. Mestre Pastinha’s capoeira academy, in the heart of Salvador Bahia, was closed and replaced by a restaurant in 1973 and thereafter Pastinha retired from active capoeira and died as a poor man. Asian martial arts were starting to flood also Brazil, even if it was affected by economic recession and military dictatorship. Moreover, in Bahia it was particularly difficult for masters to make a living out of capoeira since it was so many masters.

However, beneath the ashes, the seeds planted by Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha were beginning to bear fruit. In spite of the fact that Bimba left behind a number of masters who graduated with him in Bahia, such as Decânio, Jair Moura, Vermelho (to whom Bimba handed-over the running of his academy in Bahia) and Camisa Roxa, the breakthrough actually took place in Rio de Janeiro where in the mid ‘60s a group of teenagers started training capoeira very intensively. Even if they had few contacts with the masters from Bahia, their style was closer to Bimba’s Regional than to Pastinha’s Angola. This informal group was soon joined by a couple of capoeiristas from Bahia and in 1966 it made its first formal capoeira demonstration with the name Senzala (“slave quarters”). In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s Senzala won many capoeira competitions and became the most famous capoeira group in Rio with its acrobatic and spectacular style, attracting hundreds of students in a city from which, as we have seen, capoeira had been almost completely eradicated. In 1974, the group fragmented and the various masters started teaching in their own schools, but still kept the Senzala “brand” and continued attracting more and more students as well as already experimented capoeiristas. The Senzala group has been the main catalyst for the diffusion of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro and arguably in the rest of Brazil, naturally with the exception of Salvador Bahia. Some splinter groups from Senzala also became very famous.

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14 Some of the main Senzala masters are: Gato (“cat”), Gil Velho, Peixinho (“little fish”, recently deceased), Garrincha, Rafael, Nestor, Itamar and Toni Vargas
Two founding members of the *Senzala* group, *Mestres* Garrincha and Gil Velho, playing *Regional* in Rio de Janeiro in 1996 (Centro de Referência da Capoeira Carioca)

One of them was the group *Abadá* (from the name of the white trousers worn by slaves) founded by Mestre Camisa (“Shirt”). Camisa was actually from Bahia where he started learning capoeira at a young age with his elder brother Camisa Roxa and later trained briefly with Mestre Bimba before Bimba’s move to Goiania. In 1972 at the age of 16 Camisa left Bahia, settled in Rio, and started practicing and teaching capoeira with the *Senzala* group. With a very strong personality (as well as excellent technical skills), he could not fit well in the more egalitarian ethos of *Senzala* and so founded the group *Abadá* in 1988 that became very influential in contemporary capoeira *Regional*.

Mestre Camisa, founder of the *Abadá* group, in action in Rio in the late ‘90s (archive Abadá).

Another famous group that emerged from *Senzala* was *Capoeira Brasil*, founded by masters Paulinho Sabiá, Paulão and Boneco. Both *Abadá* and *Capoeira Brasil* had their headquarters in Rio but soon were able to open schools or at least set up classes also in the rest of Brazil on the footsteps of *Senzala*. In 1967, another master from Bahia, Mestre Suassuna, settled in what by then was the largest city in Brazil and its economic powerhouse, São Paulo, and opened his own capoeira academy, *Cordão de Ouro*. By the
early ‘80s capoeira, mainly thanks to the breakthrough achieved by *Senzala* in Rio, had spread throughout Brazil with an estimated 4 million practitioners, the second national “sport” after football.

![Acrobatic kick in contemporary Capoeira Regional](image)

All these groups, *Senzala, Abadá, Capoeira Brasil* (plus many others such as *Muzenza, Capoeira Gerais*) were practicing a style that evolved from Bimba’s *Regional*, but the *Angola* style codified by Mestre Pastinha looked as if it was confined to a few old masters in Salvador Bahia (mainly João Pequeno, João Grande and Curió). However, in 1970 Mestre Moraes, a young master from Bahia who had trained with Mestre Pastinha and Mestre João Grande, arrived in Rio de Janeiro as a fusilier in the Brazilian Navy and started teaching traditional *Capoeira Angola* during his spare time. During his 12 years in Rio de Janeiro Mestre Moraes managed to attract many *capoeristas carioca* to his pure and elegant *Angola* style full of cunningness and founded the “*Grupo Capoeira Angola Pelourinho*” (GCAP).

![Mestre João Grande (79 years old) with Mestre João Pequeno (died in December 2011 aged 94), Mestre Curió (77) and Mestre Moraes (64), guardians of the Angola style](image)

Mestre Moraes returned to Bahia in 1982, but left behind four *Mestres* in Rio, Neco, Zé Carlos, Braga and Marco Aurelio, who had graduated with him. Another *Mestre* who graduated with Mestre Moraes, Mestre Cobra Mansa (“Tamed Snake”, also known as “Cobrinha”, or “Little Snake”), founded in 1994 “*Fundação Internacional de Capoeira Angola*” (FICA) which became one of the most influential and widespread *Angola*
groups. Another influential contemporary master of *Capoeira Angola* is Mestre Jogo de Dentro (“Inner Game”) who was a student of Mestre João Pequeno and founded the group “Semente de Angola” (“Angola seed”).

By the end of the 1980s the *Angola* style had finally spread out of Bahia, first in Rio and then to the whole of Brazil and was breaking the virtual monopoly achieved by the style that has been labeled *Regional-Senzala*. The *Angola* style later attracted many *capoeiristas* of African descent with Rasta dreadlocks such as Mestre Cobra Mansa, although the “Rastafarianism” and dreadlocks were certainly not part of the original *Capoeira Angola* culture at the times of Mestre Pastinha. The revival of the *Angola* style also benefited the two “pillars” of Mestre Pastinha’s old academy, namely João Pequeno and João Grande, who had fallen into oblivion in Bahia. João Grande moved to New York City to teach capoeira in the 1990s. In 2001, he was awarded the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, which is one of the most prestigious awards given to practitioners of traditional arts in the USA.

![Mestre Cobra Mansa (left) in a defensive move, Washington DC, March 2010 (archive FICA Washington)](image)

The diffusion of capoeira beyond the borders of Brazil followed similar footsteps. The *Regional* (particularly *Senzala*) style came first, followed by *Angola*. The three pioneers,
Mestre Jelon Vieira, Mestre “Acordeon” (“Accordion”) and Mestre Nestor were in fact all playing *Capoeira Regional*. Mestre Jelon, from Bahia (were he briefly trained with Mestre Bimba), was the first Brazilian capoeira master to perform in the USA in 1975, in New York City. It is widely believed that his performances with some capoeira acrobatics (like handstands and head spins) contributed to the birth of “Break Dance” in the USA. In 1979 a famous student of Mestre Bimba, Mestre Acordeon, moved to San Francisco and started giving classes at Stanford University, although later he also started teaching capoeira also to underprivileged youths. In 1971, Mestre Nestor, from the Senzala group, gave the first capoeira performance in Europe, in London, and then toured in a few other European cities for almost a year. When he returned in Europe in 1983 he estimated that there were at least 30 capoeira teachers and instructors in western Europe and a similar number in the USA. In Milan, my hometown, capoeira started in October 1987 with Mestre Baixinho (“the little one”) who, as many capoeira teachers, arrived with a Brazilian show group mainly performing samba.

It is impossible to say how many capoeira instructors and masters are scattered around the world in the 21st century. Let me only mention that to my knowledge, apart from the main western European and North American cities, capoeira is performed also in former Yugoslavia, Russia, Israel, Mexico, Japan and some Arab countries. It has also reached Africa where it is performed at least in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and, at an amateur level, also in Tanzania. Thus, capoeira has now made the full circle back to Africa. Capoeira is a good vehicle for social integration, both in Brazil, where it is taught in pedagogical programmes for disadvantaged kids in the *favelas*, in western Europe and in the occupied Palestinian territories, where it attracts many students of African or middle eastern origin who identify with the narrative of the oppression and resistance of black Brazilians. Capoeira has also become the main vector for the diffusion of the Portuguese language in the world, as, apart from the singing, classes are normally taught in Portuguese.

From an organizational point of view, capoeira teachers belong to what may be defined as “mega groups” (e.g. Senzala, Abadá, the FICA) or to smaller groups. Unfortunately, capoeira has a spontaneous, anarchic tendency that has prevented the establishment of common rules under a Brazilian Capoeira Federation, unlike oriental martial arts such as karate. This means that there is no quality control on instructors, professors or self-appointed *mestres*, who come and teach capoeira abroad, helped by the global availability of cheap airfares and the lack of a need for visas for Brazilians in most western countries. Normally the mega groups ensure a little bit more consistency in teaching standards, but there are also excellent instructors belonging to smaller groups. Moreover, while most have very good practical capoeira skills (playing capoeira as well as the instruments and singing), few have an articulate knowledge of capoeira history and are often challenged by inquisitive foreign students. It is normally a good idea to carry out a Google background check before starting capoeira classes with an unknown instructor.

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7. The meaning of capoeira today

Naturally, capoeira means different things to different people, so I will inevitably give a personal view. One of the most common questions from non-practitioners is, “what is the aim of a capoeira contest in a roda?” Since capoeira has music and a dancing step (called “ginga”) and, particularly outside Brazil, is often non-contact, some persons consider it as just an acrobatic dance or a form of rhythmic gymnastics. This is a mistake as capoeira, which started as a form of self-defence and street-fight of people of African descent in Brazil, is still a “semi-full contact” martial art. If you do not pay attention, as a minimum you can find yourself flat on the ground as a result of a “rasteira” (foot sweep). The fact that, as we have seen, music and dance steps were introduced to conceal the martial aspects, does not mean that it has lost its efficiency.

The aim should be to show to your opponent that you can dominate him (or her) and would be able to kick him (or her) without necessarily hitting him (or her), but within the beauty and fluidity of the movements. The main defensive movements are esquivas (“dodges”) from which a counter-attack can be launched, even while laying on the ground. The pattern is one of “question and answer” that is an attack (normally a kick) followed by a defensive move (normally an esquiva) and counter-attack. A metaphor can be that of clockwork.

Cunningness and malice (“mandinga” and “malandragem”) are also extremely important. It is perfectly normal in capoeira to distract the attention of the opponent for example by faking an injury or to do an awkward move that prompts the opponent to get close and then launch a surprise counter-attack. Another metaphor can therefore be that of a chess game. At times capoeiristas also make fun of their opponent in what amounts to almost a pantomime. Thus, the expression “jogar” (“play”) capoeira is used more often than “lutar” (fight). Making your opponent fall down with a rasteira (sweep) or cabeçada (head-butt) in the chest is acceptable, but to kick him (or her) in the face is not, unless the roda degenerates, which in Brazil is not uncommon, particularly among capoeiristas of different groups.

As we have seen, spectacular acrobatic movements, of the type found in Olympic gymnastics, have started spreading in capoeira particularly since the development of the Regional Senzala style. Some of these acrobatic moves have also a martial element as defence or attack. However, at times acrobatics are emphasized too much as a show by street capoeiristas who want to impress tourists and induce them to give some money. Acrobatics should never be made at the expense of martial efficiency at the wrong time, otherwise there is always the danger of being thrown to the ground or be kicked. Finally, the tempo and style of capoeira (more playful or aggressive) should be based on the
rhythm ("toque"\textsuperscript{17}) played by the berimbau. Apart from playing capoeira, a capoeirista should also know how to play the various musical instruments, sing in Portuguese (and eventually compose capoeira songs\textsuperscript{18}) and know capoeira’s history. These characteristics apply to both the Angola and Regional styles, which both include excellent and poor instructors.

Capoeira has made a long journey from the violent self-defence and street gang fight of Brazilians of African descent in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, to the culturally rich fighting dance of the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It now helps to further social inclusion among different segments of society (in terms of social classes, ethnic or immigrant groups), either in Brazil or abroad. With its holistic approach involving music, singing as well as defensive and offensive moves, capoeira helps to develop harmony, but at the same time also to keep the capoeiristas always on their toes, with open eyes, to be able to deal with the unexpected treacheries of life. Capoeira’s recent globalization has ensured its spread all over the world to new practitioners who discovered this hitherto little-know expression of Brazilian culture. Capoeira will no doubt continue to evolve, but will hopefully remain firmly rooted in Mestre Pastinha’s and Mestre Bimba’s tradition.

\textit{Geneva, March 2014.}

\textsuperscript{17} There are differences in the number and types of toques between the Angola and the Regional styles and even differences among masters within the same style. The main ones are Angola (slow tempo, emphasizing cunningness), Benguela (in Regional style only, played similarly to Angola, but without some rituals), \textit{São Bento Grande and São Bento Pequeno} (faster tempo, emphasizing the martial aspect), Iuna (only for graduates, emphasizing the beauty of movements) and \textit{Cavallaria} (fast tempo, originally to warn that the police was arriving).

\textsuperscript{18} An analysis of the themes covered by capoeira songs is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to mention that they often refer to slavery, serfdom, repression and liberation, to historical anecdotes (for example the war on Paraguay) and to the skills and cunningness of certain famous capoeiristas (such as Besouro Preto, Pastinha or Bimba). They also serve as an indication to the capoeiristas in the roda (inviting them to play more slowly, more aggressively, closer to the ground etc...)
Annex: dictionary of main capoeira terms used in this paper

*Atabaque:* drum/percussion of African origin similar to the Cuban *conga.*

*Berimbau:* percussive instrument of African origin formed by a piece of wood bended as a bow, a metal string and an empty calabash. It sets the tempo and style of the capoeira contest and is normally played by the Master. In a full capoeira musical ensemble there are 3 *berimbau:* *Gunga* (grave tone), *Medio* (medium tone) and *Viola* (high tone). The *Gunga* leads the others.

*Benção:* lit. “blessing”, a straight kick, also known as *chapa de frente* (straight sole of the foot)

*Cabeçada:* head-butt (widely used offensive movement).

*Candomblé:* Afro-Brazilian syncretic cult of West African (*Yoruba*) origin.

*Capoeirista:* capoeira fighter, but also singer and musician.

*Cavallaria:* mounted police; a *toque* (rhythm) played by the *berimbau* (to signal that the police was coming).

*Esquiva:* “dodge”, defensive move to dodge or duck an incoming kick.

*Ginga:* “swinging movement”, dance like step that is the basis for all capoeira moves.

*Malandragem / Malandro:* cunningness, street wise malice / cunning person, street-wise thug.

*Maltas:* street gangs in Rio de Janeiro in the 19th century.

*Mandinga / Mandinguero:* cunningness, magical power / cunning *capoeira*st endowed with almost magical powers to trick the opponent (from the *Mandingo* tribe from West Africa).

*Mestre:* a capoeira Master.

*Pandeiro:* tambourine, another instrument widely played in the *roda.*

*Rabo de Arraia:* lit. “Manta ray sting tail” (a rotating kick, launched with the back turned against the opponent).

*Rasteira:* foot sweep to make the opponent lose his/her balance

*Roda:* literally “circle”; it is the physical and symbolic space that delimits a capoeira contest. At one end, it is formed by the musical ensemble and on the wings by groups of *capoeiristas* who wait for their turn to enter and “play” against each other (in pairs).

*Toque:* the specific rhythm played by the *berimbau.*

*Valentão:* tough, boastful guy.