

Brief Description Of Capoeira

by Mestre Acordeon

Capoeira is an art form that involves movement, music, and elements of practical philosophy. One experiences the essence of capoeira by "playing" a physical game called jogo de capoeira (game of capoeira) or simply jogo. During this ritualized combat, two capoeiristas (players of capoeira) exchange movements of attack and defense in a constant flow while observing rituals and proper manners of the art. Both players attempt to control the space by confusing the opponent with feints and deceptive moves. During the jogo, the capoeiristas explore their strengths and weaknesses, fears and fatigue in a sometimes frustrating, but nevertheless enjoyable, challenging and constant process of personal expression, self-reflection and growth.

The speed and character of the jogo are generally determined by the many different rhythms of the berimbau, a one-string musical bow, which is considered to be the primary symbol of this art form. The berimbau is complemented by the pandeiro (tambourine), atabaque (single-headed standing drum), agogo (double bell), and reco-reco (grooved segment of bamboo scraped with a stick) to form a unique ensemble of instruments. Inspiring solos and collective singing in a call-and-response dialogue join the hypnotic percussion to complete the musical ambiance for the capoeira session. The session is called roda de capoeira, literally "capoeira wheel," or simply roda. The term roda, refers to the ring of participants that defines the physical space for the two capoeiristas engaged in the ritualized combat.

Historical Background

During the Middle Ages, Portugal suffered a drastic decrease in its labor force as a result of human loss in the war for independence from Castile, and from a series of epidemics of devastating proportions. Moreover, a huge deployment of people to Africa and India in Portugal's colonial endeavors intensified the crisis (Pinsky1988: 14). Gomes Eannes de Azurara was one of the first to register Portugal's incipient attempt to replace its productive hands, narrating how Antão Gonçalves in 1441 captured and took the first Africans to the Infant D. Henrique, King of Portugal (in Rego 1968: 1-2). By the early 1500s, Portugal had begun extensive human trafficking from Africa to its South American colony of Brazil.

Between the years of 1500 and 1888, almost four million souls crossed the Atlantic in the disease-ridden slave ships of the Portuguese Crown. The signing of the Queiroz Law prohibiting slave traffic in 1850 was not strong enough to empty the sails of the tumbadoras (slave ships) crossing the ocean. Many Africans were still forced to face the "middle passage" and were smuggled into Brazil. The ethnocultural contributions of this massive forced human migration, along with those of the Native inhabitants of the colony and those of the Europeans from Portugal, shaped the people and the culture of Brazil.

From the Africans, we inherited the essential elements of capoeira. This is evident in the aesthetics of movement and musical structure of the art, in its rituals and philosophical principles, as well as in historical accounts of the ethnicity of those who practiced capoeira in the past.

Most of the questions related to the formative period of the art still remain unanswered. When, how, and why did capoeira emerge in Brazil? From what specific cultural groups did it come, and from which original art forms did it derive? The difficulty in answering these questions resides in the lack of written registers of capoeira and in the absence of an oral tradition that reaches as far back as the pre-dawn of the art. Also, the unclear Europeans' notion of cultural and geographic boundaries of the African territories at the beginning of Portugal's colonial enterprises, as well as the mixing of Africans from different tribes in the same work areas in Brazil, increase our uncertainties.

According to E. Bradford Burns, it is possible to identify three major African contributors to Brazilian society: the Yoruban and Dahomean Sudanese people originating from regions that later became Liberia, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and the southern part of contemporary Benin (former Dahomey); the "Mohammedanized Guinea-Sudanese" Hausa; and the Bantu people from Angola, Congo and Mozambique (Burns 1970: 39).

Early documents about enslaved Africans in Brazil, however, refer only to "natives from Guiné." At that time, "Guiné" was a generic denomination for a large area of West Africa with no precise ethnic or politico-geographic definition in the European mind. "[Guiné] extended from the delta of the Senegal River limits of the desert region between Senegal and Mauritania to the Orange River, in the contemporary Gabon ..." (Pinsky, 1988: 24). Kenny Mann (1966), in his own description of the area, placed its boundaries a bit further north, so as not to include the contemporary states of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and the Island of São Tomé. Such broad geographical definitions have been insufficient and confusing for the investigator looking into the ethnic history of capoeira. This lack of clarity was felt even by the earliest chroniclers of the art. Plocido de Abreu stated in his pioneer work *Os capoeiras* (1886), the difficulties he faced in his attempt to trace the origins of the art form (Soares, 1994: 10).

The importance of Yoruban influences in the state of Bahia has long been recognized. Recently, though, the weight of the Bantu contribution has been reevaluated, gaining more prominence as traces of this culture are identified in the way of life of the inhabitants of Bahia's old cities. Since the cadence in the ginga (the multi-functional and characteristic movement of capoeira), the music, and the rituals of today's capoeira seem to have radiated from the Reconcavo Baiano (coastal areas of the Bay of All Saints in Bahia), it is not a far stretch of the imagination to associate the formative elements of the art with cultural expressions embedded in the traditions of the sub-Saharan Bantu people from Angola.

In reality, the historical journey of capoeira is as elusive to grasp as is the disconcerting typical movement of a good capoeirista. We know for sure that the largest cultural river that flooded Brazil ran from Africa, but the sources of its tributaries are still hidden, and the specifics of its murmurs are still like the riddles of an ancient sphinx yet to be deciphered.

Origins

Three main lines of thought concerning the origins of *capoeira* have been introduced throughout the times: *capoeira* was already formed in Africa; *capoeira* was created by Africans and their descendants in the rural areas of colonial Brazil; and *capoeira* was created by Africans and their descendants in one of the major Brazilian urban centers. Arguments supporting these theories have long been discussed.

One of the first theories proposing African origin for capoeira was put forward in 1889 by Beaurepaire-Rohan, who defined the art of capoeira as being a "kind of athletic game introduced by the Africans..." (in Soares, 1993: 20).

Much later, in 1960, the Portuguese Albano de Neves e Souza revisited the African origins hypothesis, writing: "Among the Mucupe in Southern Angola, there is a zebra dance, the n'golo, ... The n'golo is capoeira" (In Moura, 1980: 15-16). Kongo scholar Dr. K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kia introduced yet another possible African "ancestor" of capoeira: "Kipura, in the Kongo cultural context, is ... an individual whose techniques of fight or struggle are based or developed on the ground of roosters fighting techniques ... (in Dawson, 1993).

For the last three decades, theories of rural Brazilian origins of *capoeira* have been popular among young fight-oriented *capoeiristas*. One of these theories was promoted in detail by the professor of journalism Augusto Ferreira, who emphasized the martial aspects of *capoeira*. In what seems to be a rather creative description, he wrote in the *Journal of Capoeira* (1968, vol2: 6) that capoeira was born out of a "burning desire for freedom," developing its structure as a fight in the the *quilombos*, back-country villages formed by runaway slaves.

Brasil Gerson (n/d), in his book *History of Rio de Janeiro's Streets*, presented a theory supporting the urban origins of *capoeira*. He stated that in the street Rua da Praia de D. Manoel, there was a large bird market where the slaves converged carrying their "*capoeiras*" (baskets) of chickens on their heads. The game of *capoeira*, Gerson proposed, "was born from the slaves' pastimes at this market" (Gerson, 3rd. Edition p. 31).

This theory was later accepted by the respected Brazilian linguist Antenor Nascentes (n/d), while examining the etymology of the word *capoeira*. Nascentes wrote: "The slaves who brought *capoeiras* of chickens to sell in the market, while waiting for the market to open, would enjoy themselves by playing the game of *capoeira*. As a metonymy *res pro persona*, the name of the thing was passed on to the person related with it" (In Rego 1968, pp. 24-25).

Waldeloir Rego (1968), an African-Brazilian sociologist and expert in African culture in the Americas, has written one of the most comprehensive and well-researched books on capoeira. In his book, *Capoeira Angola*, Rego presented his claim:

My thesis is that capoeira was created in Brazil, with a series of movements and rhythms common to all of those who practice it...[C]oncerned with capoeira's improvement, its own inventors and descendants changed it with the introduction of new movements and toques [rhythms of the berimbau] transforming some and extinguishing others... [This process occurred] over time and in conjunction with the social and economic development of the community that practiced capoeira, thus relegating many of [the movements and rhythms] to the realm of the forgotten (Rego, 1968: 35).

The existence of *capoeira* in different parts of Brazil without apparent connection suggested yet another proposition about the formation of a more unified display of the art. This theory was presented by Nestor Capoeira in his book *Fundamentos da Malícia* (1992):

Based upon what we have seen up to this point, I am going to propose the thesis that the fights, the dances, rhythms and musical instruments from different African ethnicities did not fuse to 'escape prohibitions and to deceive the white lords' but, this synthesis happened after 1830 in accordance with a general tendency of the black community, in which, the armed fight, impossible to be won, was substituted by the conquering of space and territory through culture. And, that the jogo de capoeira did not have an exclusive center of dispersion, but sprouted spontaneously in different formats and in various locations materializing in Brazil between 1830 and 1930, a certain archetype existent within the black collective unconscious (Capoeira, pp. 40).

Nestor Capoeira's considerations were part of a complex and interesting discussion with Muniz Sodré, professor of communications and a well versed scholar in *capoeira*, *candomblé* (certain African-Brazilian religious ceremonies) and other African cultural traditions. In this discussion, commenting from the African cultural perspective, in which the ritual and the sacred are present in everything, Muniz Sodré said:

The hypothesis of 'unconscious' [would be] valid for the modern occidental society which repressed the ritual, in the sense that it represses the mythical manifestation of the world...However, something is hidden, and hides itself through the secret, the secret that is controlled by the elders, by the initiated. Therefore, repression does not exist, secret does. If there is not repression, there is not the unconscious.

Capoeira is the conjunction of cult, secret and fight...The secret is a dynamic of communication, of the redistribution of *axé* [the force that moves everything in the universe according to some African beliefs], of the existence and vigor of the cosmic game...

In terms of fight...it is not [only] the violence or the force of the weapons that come into play (the war is just a small and episodic aspect of the fight), but the tricks, the astuteness, the courage and the power of realization (*Axé*) involved (Capoeira, 1992: 39-41).

What then is *capoeira*? Is it African, and if so, what does it mean to be African in this case? *Capoeira* has been an elusive "chameleonic" art form that has assumed many shapes throughout its existence. Change, however, has never been able to wring out the reflection of *capoeira's* soul, or extirpate its formative seeds, the common denominator threading together all the shapes *capoeira* has assumed. *Capoeira's* spirit, its innate capacity to resist pressure through a deceptive strategy of adaptability and "non-direct" confrontation of opposing forces, is one of the essences that exudes from its African roots. Julio Cezar de Souza Tavares, one of the contemporary authors who revolutionized the thinking on *capoeira*, referred to the art as the "war dance: archive weapon" in his master's sociological thesis. Tavares introduced:

The comprehension of one phenomenon that characterizes the manifestation of the wisdom of the blacks, is the wisdom of the body. This knowledge constitutes the nucleus, a body of configured attitudes, while [being] a strategy, with the goal of edifying spaces where the socio-cultural identity would be presented...

It is exactly for being always treated as a body that exclusively incarnates work, this side of the African culture reinforced itself to become strategically structured with the goal of preserving and strengthening the body as an instrument of cultural transmission of the socially acquired habits (archive), and at the same time, as an instrument of organization of the physical, individual, and community defense (weapon)... [In Brazil], capoeira was chosen as an event that possesses this corporeal knowledge. Of course, another kind of practice could have been chosen, but [capoeira] was the one that better allocated itself according to the binomial archive weapon (In Capoeira, 1992: 41-42).

Capoeira is not the only popular expression that derives from the same formative elements. African in essence, these elements are present in other African rooted art forms, such as the dances *mani* from Cuba and *laghya* from Martinique, or in other purely African cultural expressions, such as the ceremonial dance *n'golo* from Angola. In many ways, these arts resemble *capoeira*. However, common structural elements that are coalesced in different geographic and cultural environments result in different outcomes. In spite of *capoeira's* mutant, broad and diffuse contours that may obfuscate those who are not experienced enough to understand the art's complexities and contradictions, *capoeira* is a well-known popular cultural expression that has been practiced in Brazil for centuries. As the venerable capoeira teacher Mestre Pastinha said: "*Capoeira is capoeira...is capoeira...is capoeira*" (Pastinha, n/d).

Pre-Republican Capoeira

Capoeira has undergone many changes throughout the times. For the purpose of this paper, the different forms of capoeira documented through oral tradition and written accounts, which thrived through the end of the nineteenth century, are grouped under the label Pre-Republican Capoeira. These manifestations of the art were called *vadiação* (a term with various meanings related to playing around, doing nothing), *malandragem* (implied in the activity of bums, deceitfulness, street smarts, cunning), *capoeiragem*, or simply, *capoeira*.

Common to the different manifestations of capoeira until recent years was the constant attention the art received from the social mechanisms of repression, such as the *Secretaria de Polícia* (Police Secretary) from Rio de Janeiro in the early 1800s, and the *Guarda Real de Polícia* (Royal Guard of Police), which was created in 1809 in the same city.

According to police reports and the majority of history registers, capoeiristas would spend their time involved in criminal activities, disturbing members of the established society. Some chronicles penned by prominent writers were more sympathetic to the capoeiristas. Many of these chroniclers emphasized the ideal of "recuperating" capoeira from the status of a legal crime to an accepted "national form of combat" (Soares, 1993 p.8). However, these visionary ideals for nineteenth-century Brazil did not blossom. At the end of the century, capoeira continued to be a weapon of survival for slaves, free blacks, vagrants, and even jobless Europeans lost in Brazil.

In Rio de Janeiro and Recife capoeiristas would ally themselves in groups called *maltsas*, which were usually identified according to their neighborhoods. During religious festivities and political rallies, the most notorious *maltsas* would confront each other in bloody combat, which caused great concern for the general population.

In Bahia, these associations were not as common, perhaps because the capoeira from different regions in Brazil were subject to different influences. Great numbers of written accounts about capoeira in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, reveal an art form that seems to have received European cultural influences. Waldemar Oliveira (1970) wrote that the well-regarded historian Melo de Moraes Filho in the late 1700's associated the capoeira style from Rio de Janeiro at the time with various athletic exercises, including the French boxing *savate*, the Portuguese *jogo de pau* (stick fight), rowing, and English boxing (Oliveira, 1970:74).

It is difficult to see any relationship between capoeira as we know it today and rowing, or between capoeira and English boxing. However, when comparing drawings depicting capoeiristas from Rio de Janeiro in the late 1800s with drawings of *savate* stemming from the same epoch, it is indeed difficult to differentiate the two practices. The capoeira drawings of Kalixto Cordeiro in 1906 (in Moura 1985: 88-91), the drawings of *savate* in Charlemont's book of 1877 (fig. 45-47: 65), the well-known photos of the famous capoeirista Cir'aco da Silva in a 1909 issue of the magazine *Careta* (in Moura 1991: 35), and the photos in the Delahay's 1991 book of *savate* and *chausson* (36, bottom) all render the two art forms virtually indistinguishable.

In 1889, one year after the signing of the "Golden Law" by Princess Isabel that marked the official end of slavery, a major transformation shook the political structure of Brazil. After almost one century of being an unsuccessful monarchy, Brazil became a Republic. The change in government caused dramatic consequences to the lives of capoeiristas in major urban centers.

The Brazilian Empire lasted sixty-seven years, from 1822 to 1889. In its last days, conflicts between Republicans and Monarchists occurred frequently. The streets of Rio de Janeiro, were the stage of actual battles that frightened the general population. In order to protect Princess Isabel, the Monarchists created the *Guarda Negra* (Black Guard) composed of blacks, mulattos, and many freed slaves. These men were extremely devoted to the Princess because she had signed the law abolishing slavery. The *Guarda Negra* battled Republicans until the last spark of [the] empire's life had died out. Furious, Republicans swore to kill its members as if they were "killing dogs." If the Monarchy could not extinguish Capoeira, the newly established Republic was going to try (Almeida, 1986: 28).

Repressed Street Capoeira

After the proclamation of the Republic of Brazil in 1889, the attempt to contain the trouble-making activities of the capoeiristas was intensified. Indeed, the capoeiristas received specific mention in the first *Código Penal da República dos Estados Unidos do Brasil* (Penal Code of the Republic of the United States of Brazil), instituted by decree on October 11, 1890: Art. 402. To perform on the streets or public squares the exercise of agility and corporal dexterity known by the name, *capoeiragem*; to run with weapons or instruments capable of inflicting bodily injuries, provoke turmoil, threaten certain or uncertain persons, or incite fear of bad actions; Sentence prison cell for two to six months (Oscar Soares 1904).

The Republican police enforcement was severe, and tales of persecution are abundant. Many *capoeiristas* would run as the police squadron arrived, others were put in jail or deported, and some would bribe the police to let them go.

Within this struggle, which lasted until the end of the 1920's, the capoeira from Bahia began to emerge, initiating its almost mythological journey to influence the present-day shape and display of the art form. It became noticed for its soulful characteristics: songs with noticeably African melodic lines and occasional African-language lyrics, playfulness and theatrics.

Perhaps, applying an unconscious strategy in a demanding game of survival, capoeira had changed again. As Nestor Capoeira observed in his text already quoted previously, "...the armed fight, impossible to be won, was substituted by the conquering of space and territory through culture" (Nestor Capoeira, 1922 p. 40). Perhaps capoeira had just disguised the fierce fighting aspect that had been described in past written accounts of the art.

During these troubled times, it is known that good capoeiristas hid their art far from the most visible street displays of capoeira. The lore of the art is full of great fighters, such as Pedro Porreta, Chico Tres Pedacos and the famous Bezouro Mangangá. Jair Moura also enumerates "Tiburcinho, Bilusca, Maré, Noronha, Américo Pequeno, Juvenal da Cruz, Manoel Rozendo, Delfino Teles, João Clarindo, Livino Diogo e Francisco Sales" (Moura, 1980 p. 27). Amongst these guardians of the art, the legendary Mestre Bimba, Manuel dos Reis Machado, emerged to become one of the most respected personalities in the historical trajectory of capoeira .

Capoeira Regional

Mestre Bimba (1889-1974) was considered by his students, his peers and the general public as an extraordinary capoeirista and an important personality within the African-Brazilian religion of *candomblé*. He lived a simple life deeply rooted in his ancestors' culture and taught capoeira for almost sixty years.

Early in his teaching career, in reaction to the sloppiness of some of the capoeira displayed on the streets of Bahia, Mestre Bimba resolved to train his students to become powerful fighters. To demonstrate the validity of his training method, he challenged his contemporaries from other schools and from other martial arts to public combats. Mestre Bimba is known to have won all of these challenges, bringing to his style national attention and a large number of enthusiastic young students.

The growth of Mestre Bimba's style would not have been possible if he had not opened a legalized school for the teaching of capoeira. The capoeira school of Mestre Bimba was officially registered with the Office of Education, Health and Public Assistance of Bahia in 1936, opening a precedent for greater tolerance towards the practice of other African-Brazilian popular expressions. The school was registered under the name of *Centro de*

Cultura Física Regional (Center of Regional Physical Culture). Because of the school's name, used to get through a loophole in the legal prohibition of capoeira, Mestre Bimba's style became known as Capoeira Regional.

The main characteristics of Mestre Bimba's capoeira were: The training of the art in enclosed school facilities; the implementation of a course curriculum; the introduction of a systematic training method; a defined musical ensemble of one berimbau and two pandeiros, and an emphasis placed on the rhythms of São Bento Grande, Banguela and Luna, which mandated specific jogos.

Mestre Bimba's most important contribution was perhaps the revolutionary concept that an activity outlawed by the dominant elites could become a prestigious art form freely practiced and taught as a means of subsistence in legally established organizations.

Capoeira Angola

The easing of repression on popular expressions during the government of Getulio Vargas in the mid-thirties made the timing right for Mestre Bimba's concept to be realized. Other capoeiristas followed in his footsteps. Amorzinho, Aberrê, Antônio Maré, Daniel Noronha, Onça Preta, and Livino Diogo all became involved in the quest to create an organization to facilitate the practice of their capoeira in this new stage of the art's development.

From amongst those involved in this quest, Vicente Joaquim Ferreira Pastinha, Mestre Pastinha, accepted the responsibility to care for this association. In his own words: "On February 23, 1941, in the Jingibirra at the end of the neighborhood of Liberdade, this center was born. Why? It was [1] Vicente Ferreira Pastinha who gave the name "Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola [Sports Center of Capoeira Angola]" (In Decânio, 1994: 4a).

In the pursuit of organizing his beloved capoeira, Mestre Pastinha mobilized his students and politically influential friends and conducted numerous meetings with other capoeiristas. Finally, after several years of struggle and long periods of inactivity, the Centro de Capoeira Angola, was officially established on October 1, 1952 as the school of Mestre Pastinha at the Largo do Pelourinho (Pelourinho plaza).

Mestre Pastinha was an extraordinary character innovative, wise and open-minded. Well-deserved for his total commitment to capoeira, his work and wisdom, Vicente Pastinha, son of a Spaniard and a Brazilian woman of African descent, became the primary historical point of reference for the practitioners of Capoeira Angola and for those concerned with his unique philosophical approach to capoeira.

Capoeira Angola was characterized by: a high degree of combat simulation in which the mere suggestion of an attack should be acknowledged; a focus on rituals, strategy and tactics of the game; and an emphasis on playfulness and theatrics of the movement. Capoeira Angola was predominantly practiced as an amusement during weekends and open plaza festivities.

Present Day Capoeira

Both Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional have generated new schools and styles based upon interpretations of the teachings of Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Bimba. Some of these schools have attempted to maintain the characteristics of the original styles of these great mestres, while others have developed their own characteristics and styles.

Most visible in the United States are schools that I consider belonging to the following stylistic approaches: Contemporary Capoeira Regional, Contemporary Capoeira Angola and Contemporary Capoeira.

Contemporary Capoeira Regional, which emphasizes the efficiency of capoeira's techniques and the athletic aspects of the art, emerged in the early 70's and became extremely popular.

Contemporary Capoeira Angola codified some elements of Capoeira Angola, developed an articulated discourse based on "traditional values," and a well-defined political agenda based on Afro-centric perspectives. This approach started in the early 80's and has influenced the thinking of present day capoeira.

Contemporary Capoeira is the predominant approach in Brazil, encompassing all schools that do not fall strictly into any of the previous categories. Some of these schools understand capoeira as a multi-dimensional art form and attempt to reflect in their display the diversity and richness of today's capoeira.

Notes On My Concerns As A Capoeira Teacher In The United States

What does it take to enjoy, or even to become passionate about capoeira? Not much. The appreciation of its aesthetics and atmosphere come easily, along with the unconscious attraction to the art form's power and depth. One should not feel obliged to delve deeper than that. But what does it take to be a conscious capoeirista in the complex society of today's world?

It is easy to get passionate about capoeira, and passion itself has been one of the propelling forces of this art form throughout the times. For most youngsters, the passion comes from the enthralling movement. The art form's acrobatic aspects, its effectiveness as a form of self-defense and its continuous flow that exudes an animal like primitive force, all strike a chord, as they did for me when I was a child:

"We walked up the...hill to the Paiol. In a small dirt area, Venâncio, Inácio, Angelo, and others were playing [capoeira]. My God, such impact! I could not believe what I saw. The sweaty bodies were performing incredible movements which I always fantasized about doing things of the circus by professional acrobats. From that moment on, Capoeira caught my soul (Almeida, 1986: 111)."

Capoeira has other appeals for those who are more mature and open-minded: the challenge of understanding an art form from a different cultural context, including its philosophy and music with lyrics in Portuguese; the African roots of the art, which for many, seems like a call from distant ancestors; the extraordinary political potential which may be explored to the fullest extent; and the power to fire contemporary debates focusing on the issues of race, ethnicity, and identity in diasporic communities.

While it is easy to get passionate about capoeira, it is not so easy, here in the United States, to obtain the proper information necessary to fully understand the art's intricacies. It is natural to experience some degree of confusion when studying about other cultures. Therefore, misinterpretations are inevitable as capoeira grows in the powerful and influential culture of the United States.

One of the primary causes of misinterpretation of capoeira in the U.S. has to do with the lack of knowledge and unfounded assumptions made by those who have put forward most of the capoeira discourse and literature available in English language. Certainly, the individuals who have presented this information are compelled by capoeira. Yet some have never practiced capoeira, and others have not studied capoeira long enough to present more than their own assumptions. Unfortunately, individuals who are not aware

of their own lack of understanding have put themselves in the position of speaking and writing about the art and even teaching capoeira without the supervision of acknowledged mestres.

I have noticed representations of capoeira in many written works and in some prominent schools' approaches, which define very particular views. These views do not reflect the reality of the capoeira practiced by almost one million people in present-day Brazil. Some of the views are completely absurd and naive; others seem to have been thought out with consciously cultivated intentions to fit capoeira into limiting agendas. The agendas range from those which refuse to admit the socio political implications of the art, to those which exaggerate these same implications.

Until now in the United States, the idea of bringing theoretical discussions on historical, social and political issues to the forefront of capoeira classes, meetings and formal encounters has been foreign to many practitioners of the art. Even the most publicized capoeira conferences have focused primarily on training techniques, exotic displays of capoeira, or other commercially appealing unrelated arts such as samba, bossa-nova, chorinho, pagode e samba-enrêdo. Among the few exceptions were the Midwest Capoeira Conference I organized as the Tinker Visiting Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1994, and later, the First Annual International Capoeira Angola Encounter USA promoted by Mestre Cobra Mansa in 1995.

The Midwest Capoeira Conference brought together almost twenty teachers and 125 participants engaged in different formal and informal discussions on capoeira issues not normally addressed outside Brazil. Issues such as women in capoeira, racism within the art, lyrics' motifs, and the consequences of Mestre Bimba's work were discussed. Similar issues were addressed at Mestre Cobra Mansa's encounter in 1995.

In Brazil, the need for theoretical study of capoeira has long been recognized and has motivated the organization of numerous symposia and encounters dating back to 1937 with the Congresso Afro-Brasileiro. (Lyra Filho, 1974 p. 323). While still living in Brazil, I had the opportunity to participate in many highly productive and challenging national meetings. These meetings, conferences and workshops have multiplied in the past two decades, generating extraordinary discussions and an exchange of information that entices even the younger Brazilian capoeiristas.

Many organizations in Brazil have stepped forward to support the research of capoeira and to promote publication of the results. This activity has generated a wealth of documentary and interpretative works spanning the life of capoeira. Carlos Soares (1994) has given a panoramic summary of these works. His summary ranges from the writings of the mid-eighteenth century by the "pioneer chroniclers" of the art to studies done by folklorists in the 1920s and 1930s. It also includes the present day explosion of sociological and political analyses of capoeira, considered by Soares to be the "new historiography" of the art form (Soares 1994: 7-25). As a whole these works have addressed the origins of capoeira, the etymology of the word "capoeira," the oral tradition of the art, and the literature from different historical periods, as well as, the sociological, anthropological, philosophical, musical, and performance-oriented facets of capoeira.

Much of this material is available in various Brazilian bookstores and libraries. For instance, in the private collection of Raimundo C. Alves de Almeida, Mestre Itapoan, there are more than 2,300 books, thesis, essays, and magazine articles concerning capoeira. In Itapoan's 1993 publication *Bibliografia Critica da Capoeira*, these resources are listed with critical annotations and references for the public channels through which the material may be accessed. On account of its Portuguese-language medium, however, this pool of critical information has remained inaccessible to those who do not read Portuguese well. This language barrier is perhaps one of the reasons why so many who

speak and write about capoeira in the United States appear not to have properly researched the available literature on the art.

Nowadays, there are an extraordinary number of capoeira practitioners. The diversity of knowledge, philosophies, and existing styles is a result of the social, economic and political scenario of Brazil. The crossing of geographical borders has also already affected the art form. Today's capoeirista should reflect on present day reality, thinking consciously and maturely about how to channel the force of capoeira in a positive direction. This direction should point both towards personal gratification, as well as towards creating solutions for contemporary problems related to all those involved in the capoeira community.

Conclusion

I would like to offer a more detailed description of the many existing capoeira styles in Brazil, and to comment on how the schools of important mestres of the art conduct their work. Since this task is impossible to accomplish in a summarized study guide, I will present, instead, an outline of work based on my own school, Capoeira-Bahia. As a student of Mestre Bimba, I was highly influenced by his approach, which I try to present properly to my students. However, as do the majority of capoeiristas in Brazil. I also welcome and support all authentically based styles of capoeira practiced today. I understand as "authentically based styles" those which reflect the knowledge and familiarity of their practitioners with what is considered "capoeira" in a general consensus of the large majority of well-known and recognized capoeira mestres in Brazil.

Since my earlier days of teaching in this country I have tried to expose my students to a broad array of capoeira styles. I have done so, by promoting trips to Brazil and sponsoring workshops with other teachers. The first workshop was conducted by Mestre Gladson from the University of São Paulo in 1982. Following Mestre Gladson's workshop was a series of others given by teachers such as Mestre João Grande, Mestre João Pequeno, Mestre Curiò, Mestre Bobò, Mestre Nô and Mestre Brasília of the style Capoeira Angola; Mestre Eziquiel Martins and Mestre Itapoan of Capoeira Regional; Mestres Camisa, Mestre Preguiça, Mestre Peixinho, Mestre Garrincha and Gato of Contemporary Capoeira Regional; Mestres Moraes and Mestre Cobra Mansa of Contemporary Capoeira Angola; and Mestre Roberto, Mestre Ousado, Mestre Sombra and Mestre Suassuna of Contemporary Capoeira. Numerous other workshops were conducted by capoeira teachers living in the United States.

For the past five years I have worked closely with Mestre Rã, Cassio Martinho, who was graduated by Mestre Suassuna from São Paulo. Mestre Rã has brought a unique perspective to our classes, which I welcome and appreciate. It is our goal to keep the school small and community oriented, and to give support to former students who request our assistance.

Our work reflects observations I have made during my many years of teaching in the United States. The reality of capoeira is somehow paradoxical to North Americans. What does it mean to defend, attacking? To go in, going out? To move sinuously and "non-directly" while being confrontational in a fight? To "stand up from a fall before reaching the ground," as said Tony Vargas in one of his songs.

The essence of capoeira seems to be the ability of the capoeirista to navigate through apparent contradictions, feeling comfortable and centered in a chaotic universe. I have noticed a distinct way of thinking among my North American students that is culturally different from the way Brazilian capoeiristas think. I see my students taking a systematic approach of simplified practicality and organization, which reflects life in the States. Here, in common everyday life, most of us write in short sentences and in a direct order; issues

are reduced to black or white; straight is straight...everything is classified, labeled and placed in its niche.

This reality affects the way my students analyze capoeira, an art form that may be out of sync with this straightforwardness. We try not to forget that capoeira was only recently introduced in this country. The North American mind's understanding and perception of the art form is still in its early stages of development.

On the basis of these views, we follow an approach that I have called "COM-PÉ, ... [which is] based on respect for the roots, applied philosophy, and disciplined training" (Almeida, 1986, p 6). These three fields were established primarily to aid students in developing a broader understanding of the art form.

Respect for the roots means studying the history of capoeira, distinguishing facts from opinions and questioning hasty conclusions with the goal of acquiring solid knowledge about the base of the art. Students are encouraged to read all the existing literature on capoeira. We discuss works that we believe to be properly researched and sound, and which may have the power to inspire further study and discoveries. We also analyze works in which we see methodological inadequacies, and we even look at those that obscure the understanding of capoeira.

Applied philosophy involves the study of the rituals, the functionality of the music, and the experience of capoeira in itself, as a process of incorporating the fundamental principles of the art into one's game. Disciplined training is a systematic approach covering the physical training of capoeira in an effective way. In Capoeira-Bahia school, we practice capoeira according to the rhythms of the berimbau. For historical reasons and because I come from the lineage of Mestre Bimba, we follow the three main rhythms that were used in his school: São Bento Grande, Banguela and Iuna. In the context of Contemporary Capoeira, we also use different berimbau's rhythms to play a broad spectrum of jogos. These jogos range from a more ritualized form of combat involving theatrical display and self-expression, to a more fight-oriented and vigorous sparring as a means of self-defense.

We encourage our students to be open-minded about other styles and perspectives of capoeira, even if the result of their search yields outcomes that may be ideologically or practically opposed to the presentations of our school. We believe that an inflexible approach, mandating exactly how the students must behave and play, undermines the most fundamental characteristics of capoeira: the freedom of individuality and self-expression through a rich and soulful cultural manifestation.

The study of capoeira demands conscientiousness. It involves a commitment beyond the practice itself. The student who knows very little of the political potential of capoeira, or nothing of its historical, social, musical, and philosophical aspects, misses as much as a capoeira "scholar" whose knowledge of Portuguese is inadequate, and who has never experienced a capoeira match from inside an unfamiliar and treacherous roda . As I described earlier, the game of capoeira is sometimes frustrating but, in the long run, it is a challenging and rewarding activity with great potential for promoting self-understanding and personal growth.

Capoeira is the art of facing danger with a smile on one's face. A good capoeirista will face the opponent confidently, but never so over-guardedly as to inhibit the flow of the game or the expression of the beauty and integrity of one's personality. The roda de capoeira, in its broader spectrum, is a metaphor for life, which demands that we negotiate treacherous situations everyday. A careless attitude in life will bring disastrous consequences. On the other hand, an excessive, over-protective attitude will also stop the flow of life, making us static and miserable. The practice of capoeira is an activity that may help fine-tune the delicate equilibrium between freeze and flow, perhaps

between failure and success. The only way to comprehend and internalize the fluid character of the art – whether the jogo de capoeira itself or the universal game of life that it mirrors is to step into the ring with the commitment to push one's limits and with an attentive effort to see beyond the game itself.

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