



Capoeira is one of Brazil's most characteristic cultural expressions. We often see definitions stating that the "game of capoeira" is a sport practiced at clubs, academies or in the streets, with no set rules but characteristically ordered nevertheless, with its own music, for which the instrument that sets the pace at practice bouts is the berimbau, or musical bow. This definition, however, reduces capoeira to its purely sporting aspects, to the detriment of the ways all its other features blend in with Brazilian society. The purpose of this publication is to reveal those elements of capoeira that transcend physical exercise, and cover the profound implications of the many ways the practice of capoeira affects the way we live in society. For all of these reasons, capoeira may be considered one of the most complex among Brazil's cultural expressions.

Capoeira's mythical and religious aspects, for instance, are a part of that which is considered "sacred" in Brazil, something that permeates all beliefs, lifestyles, dreams and struggles in our society. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda summed it up most eloquently as religious feeling, both intimate and close to the heart, accepting of spiritual contributions from many sources, and a paradigm of the courteous nature with which that writer credits the Brazilian people. Thus, the magic that imbues the world of capoeira – albeit rooted in popular imaginings – gives form to a vast spectrum of meaning through which this expression of Afro-Brazilian culture maintains ties with all that is sacred, and with a panoply of the expressions and traditions of Brazil's popular culture.

The language of capoeira helps us to understand some of the peculiarities in the way Brazilians relate to their environment. The names of many capoeira moves and techniques often have to do with our natural surroundings, and indicate how closely this practice relates to paying attention to one's environment. The very etymology of the indigenous word "capoeira" provides another example, in that it originally meant "a clearing where jungle once stood."

The History of Capoeira fleshes out these social aspects by adding a wealth of relevant historical significance. The changes through which capoeira has evolved reflect a number of transformations occurring over the last few centuries. A comprehensive look at our history must therefore include some remarks concerning the war on capoeira, which persisted throughout the 19th and into the early 20th century.

Despite concerted efforts at its suppression, however, capoeira managed to overcome all obstacles. That this was so may be owing to the fact that capoeira is a broad-based and deeply-rooted aspect of what it means to be Brazilian, and therefore not something that is easily crushed.

As a product of grassroots culture, capoeira was regarded with grave misgivings by the ruling cultural elite, as something associated with idlers and ruffians entirely lacking in social graces. It is therefore instructive to observe that capoeira today serves to eliminate some of the very social ills for which it was accusingly blamed in the past. Capoeira has revealed itself an excellent vehicle for social inclusion. This is largely due to the way capoeiristas, in their circle ceremonies, place opposites on an equal footing, encourage diversity and constantly foster the exercise of patience and humility.

In 2007, the Ministry of External Relations was pleased to sponsor more than 50 capoeira events all over the world. The spread of capoeira to other countries has greatly strengthened and benefited this martial style. Today there are *mestres* in many countries whose command of the style is as good as we see in Brazil. It would not be too much to say, then, that although capoeira has its cultural roots in Brazil and is without question a symbol of Brazilianness throughout the world, it is now so widely practiced on a global scale as to constitute Brazil's contribution to the cultural heritage of mankind. Standing as mute witness to the fact are the illustrations in this volume – photographs by Pierre Verger and drawings by Carybé – both men hailing from foreign lands, yet who, through their art, masterfully shed light on aspects peculiar to capoeira.

In the annex to this current issue of the Texts from Brazil series, there is a disc with an excerpt from the documentary "Mestre Bimba: the luminous capoeira" ("Mestre Bimba: a capoeira iluminada"), whose permission to reproduce was graciously granted by Lumen Produções. Based on the book "Mestre Bimba: Corpo de Mandinga" by Muniz Sodré, the film shows testimonies by old pupils and never-released images of the life trajectory of one of the major names in the history of capoeira. The reader who has never seen a *roda de capoeira* will thus be able to enjoy a sampling of capoeira movements, music and ritual. Hopefully, he or she will also be encouraged by both this publication and the DVD to join the fascinating world of capoeira...