

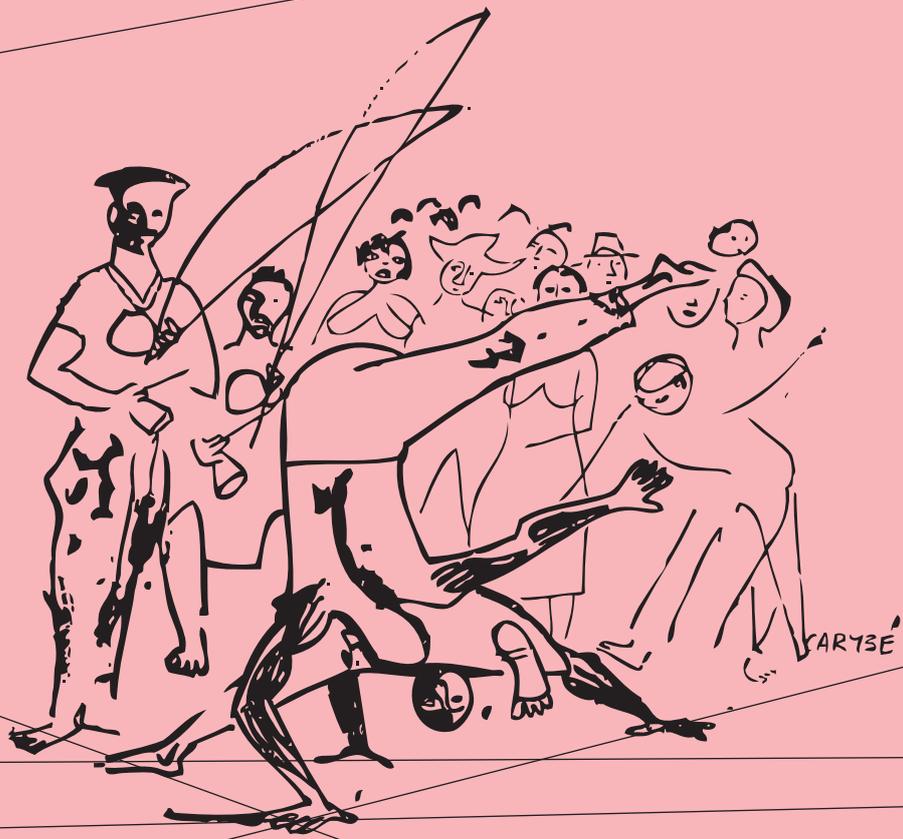
# CAPOEIRA: METAPHORS IN MOTION

ELIANE DANTAS DOS ANJOS

... TO WIN YOUR LOVE I TRIED MANDINGA  
LEARNING CAPOEIRA GINGA  
TILL I SWEEP YOU OFF YOUR FEET  
AND FASTER SET YOUR HEART TO BEAT...

(AFTER VERDADE: BY NELSON RUFINO & CARLINHOS SANTANA)

THE WORDS GINGA AND RASTEIRA CONJURE UP IMAGES OF CAPOEIRA. THEY ARE THE BASIC PATTERN AND MOST FAMILIAR MOVE IDENTIFIED EVERYWHERE WITH THIS FORM, EVEN IN HIT-PARADE SONGS, LIKE VERDADE, SUNG BY ZECA PAGODINHO. GINGA IS THAT RHYTHMIC MOTION FROM WHICH CAPOEIRA PRACTITIONERS MAKE THEIR ATTACK AND DEFENSE MOVES, WHEREAS A SWEEP (RASTEIRA) IS A TAKEDOWN MOVE IN WHICH YOUR FEET ARE SWEEPED FROM UNDER YOU.



To understand the nomenclature, that is, capoeira terminology, it helps to understand its origins and direction. Before the late 19th century there were no writings or depictions of capoeira, a martial style said to have been developed by Negro slaves who used it in self-defense in the struggle for freedom.

The full repertoire of capoeira, however, is much more extensive, varied and creative. Cartwheels, push kicks, spinning kicks, crescent-kicks, frog-hopping, flying hook-kicks, resistances and fakes are equivalent names of some of the moves. There is no limit to the number of names, since it increases with the skill and creativity of the practitioners. Capoeiristas themselves make up new names as they develop new moves or variants, which is where the metaphor is most easily appreciated.

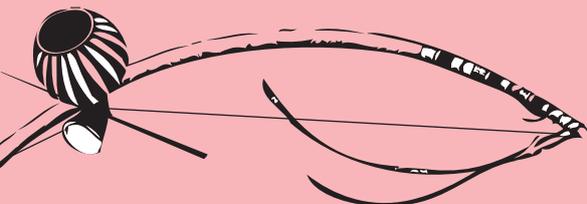
To understand the nomenclature, that is, capoeira terminology, it helps to understand its origins and direction. Before the late 19th century there were no writings or depictions of capoeira, a martial style said to have been developed by Negro slaves who used it in self-defense in the struggle for freedom. Jean-Baptiste Debret, a French artist brought to Brazil on assignment in 1816 by request of Emperor D. João VI, making reference to “cavorting negro tumblers doing numerous backflips and other somersaults to liven up the scene.” German painter and sketch artist Johann Rugendas, who visited Brazil in 1821, wrote one of the earliest definitions of capoeira in which he described it as a Negro “warrior sport,” in which they rush toward one another in an effort to butt their heads against the chest of the adversary and defend themselves with skillful feints and fakes to either side. The artist drew a comparison between the competitors and goats because of the head-to-head collisions that occurred during these bouts.

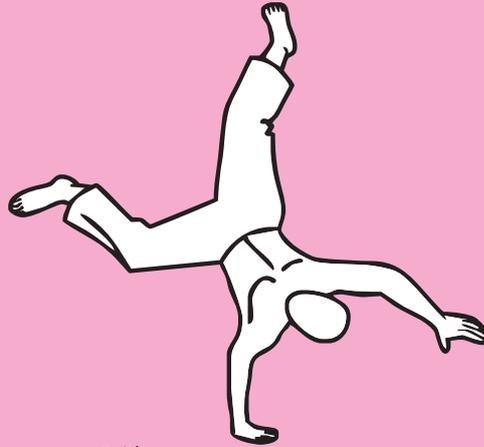
Plácido de Abreu, in his book titled *Os Capoeiras*, introduced such expressions as pompadour to sniff and antler blow (*topete a cheirar e chifrada*), for head-butts. These expressions once livened up the vocabulary of the capoeiras, themselves a persecuted lot in the late 19th century. After capoeira was legally banned (1890), it lived on in military circles, where the first manuals were produced describing this national sport. 1907 brought the publication of the *Guide to Capoeira or Brazilian Gymnastics*, by an unknown military author. Afterward, *National Gymnastics (Capoeira) Rules and Method*, by Annibal Bularmaqui, was published in 1928, and explained the moves and rules for capoeira practice.

20th-century Bahia was a veritable cornucopia of capoeira practitioners, and its claim to fame in Brazil and worldwide was staked out by the determination and leadership of two men: Manuel dos Reis Machado, *Mestre Bimba*, and Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, *Mestre Pastinha*.

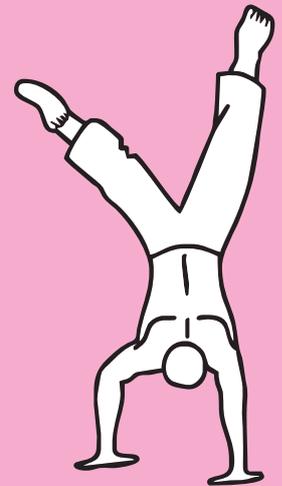
Bimba began teaching capoeira at age 18, and organized his school, *Clube União em Apuros*, in Salvador, in the borough of Engenho Velho de Brotas. At the time there was only one capoeira, with no distinction between regional and angola, for Bimba had not yet developed the regional style. Mestre Bimba claims to have created capoeira regional in 1928, after incorporating several moves from *batuque* (an African dance for men), developing new techniques and perfecting old ones. The influence of mixed martial arts can

## CAPOEIRA: METAPHORS IN MOTION





■ Aú



be seen, for instance, in techniques such as the neck hold and *cintura desprezada*, a sequence of partner-assisted throws and flips.

Contact between mestre Bimba's students and authorities in Bahia helped legitimize capoeira and remove it from the criminal code in the 1940s. As soon as Bimba's regional *baiano* style achieved recognition, traditional capoeira, as taught by Mestre Pastinha – promptly renamed capoeira *angola* – also gained in popularity.

The naming system for capoeira moves and strikes was created based on the development of the regional and *angola* schools, and several capoeira holdouts in Rio de Janeiro. As capoeira's popularity increased in the interior of Brazil and spread to other countries, variations on the basic moves were added and several new ones included in the repertoire, all of which affected the lingo. The splitting apart of capoeira also affected the moves, which may vary significantly from school to school. The *angola* stingray sting (*rabo-de-arraia*), for instance, is what capoeira regional calls a *meia-lua de compasso*, a spinning heel kick in which the striking foot does a horizontal roundhouse, only with one hand brushing rather than planted on the ground. In Rio de Janeiro's *carioca* style, the move is similar, except that the foot travels in a vertical plane.

A compilation of capoeira terms was organized by Eliane Anjos in 2003, based on writings about capoeira published since 1960 by *mestres* Bimba and Pastinha and their students, and also drawing on capoeira books widely sold throughout Brazil. The result was her *Illustrated Terminological Glossary of Capoeira Moves and Techniques*, in Portuguese. This research effort uncovered the preponderance of metaphor (name transfer by figure of speech) and metonymy (name transfer from a related concept) among the move-naming devices in this sport.

Among the associations which regularly crop up in the argot of capoeira, one expects to find several relating to animals, edged weapons, blunt instruments, circular shapes, graphic depictions and commonplace objects.

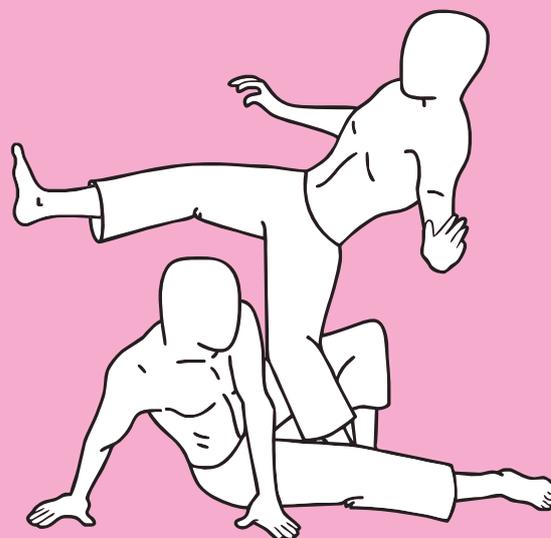
Animals are a recurring theme, which in translation yields mule kicks, stingray stings, frog hops, monkey springs and bat flights. A box on the ear is called a *galopante* because of the clopping sound, like hoofbeats. In its indigenous word origins, capoeira (*ka'a puera*) related to jungle; it meant a clearing where brush had once stood. We say, then, that capoeira, as it originated among African slaves, is closely bound up with nature, hence the use of so many animal names to signify new concepts. Movement is the essence of capoeira, as it is for any martial or bodily art, and many names come from observing or even imitating animals.

Relating words to animal movements makes the names more vivid to the mind's eye, and therefore easier to memorize. Once a name is associated with a visual concept, as we hear the animal's name, or the name of a movement characteristically associated with that creature, we can picture the move or some reasonable approximation. Rugendas, in his description, compared capoeiristas to goats because of the preponderance of head butts. Indeed, the Portuguese word *marrada*, meaning head butts by rams or goats, was used by mestre Bimba in a recorded statement on a CD titled *Regional Capoeira Course* in Portuguese. Even so, the conventional term for head butt is *cabeçada*.

Capoeira terminology is also sprinkled with the names of implements which can be used as makeshift weapons. Moves with names we'd render as a whip, harpoon, quirt or knout, forked stick, hammer-kick and scissors, show that capoeira may be understood as a physical weapon, and that its movements, judged by their names, may cause harm. Movements like the whiplash and quirt call to mind the instruments of punishment and torture inflicted on Negro slaves. The relationship of form between a weapon and a technique is a form of association, of metaphor, in which capoeira – once a weapon and nowadays considered a sport – was an original martial art.

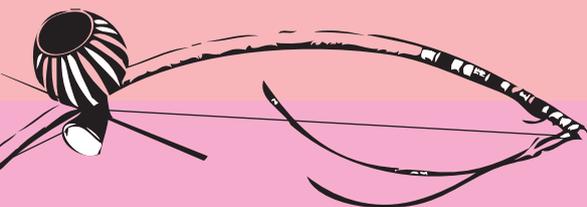
Another type of association is the relating of moves to letters of the alphabet. The cartwheel or *aú* – the origins of

Among the associations which regularly crop up in the argot of capoeira, one expects to find several relating to animals, edged weapons, blunt instruments, circular shapes, graphic depictions and commonplace objects.



■ *Tesoura de frente* or Scissors take-down

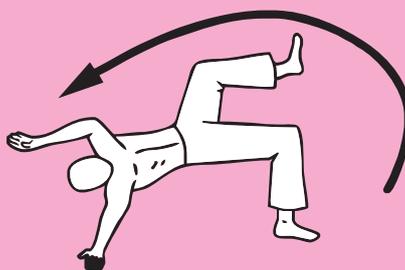
## CAPOEIRA: METAPHORS IN MOTION



1



2



3

■ *S dobrado* or Double S



4

which are controversial, the word itself being listed in the *Aurélio* dictionary (1999 Edition) as an Africanism) brings to mind a comparison between the letter A (both legs planted) and the letter U (legs turned upward). A sideways walkover in capoeira is a double-S, the curves of which, in a sense, illustrate that movement. Several versions of the crescent kick and spinning heel kick (*meia-lua, compasso, and meia-lua de compasso*) conjure up circular images, as does the roll (*rolê*).

Tapping a partner's head with your shoe, is a leather hat (*chapéu-de-couro*), a neck hold is a necktie and a *leque* (fan), describes something similar to a pike; just as the words for flank throw, mule kick, cross (a tipping move) and ear-box are synonyms for balloon, flat plate, and telephone (for the ringing in your ears). This is because people tend to relate new creations to something familiar, and pick some common feature – a shape or function – as in our examples.

Wry humor comes out in several names, such as blessing (*bênção*). This is a far cry from a petition for religious protec-

tion, in which the priest places a hand on the suppliant. In capoeira it signifies a push with a foot planted on your buddy's chest – playful roughhousing. The same sort of irreverence colors terms like mouthwash and suicide (*bochecho*, *suicídio*) for a double cheek-punch and a forward toe-touch in midair. The first can make your spit red and the other can also hurt plenty if done incorrectly.

Most metaphors arise from a similarity in form between the move and some object, animal, or letter of the alphabet. Yet similarities in function give rise to terms like *açoite* (whip), boosted throw or flip (*balão*), *bênção* (blessing), *bochecho* (mouthwash), *chibata* (quirt) and *martelo* (“hammer” kick), where the similarity derives from actual motion, rather than outward appearances.

Metonymic names refer to the outcomes of techniques, like nose-stop, hand-break and neck-break (*asfixiante*, *quebra-mão* and *quebra-pescoço*). The association with movement is clear in these examples, for the effect produced is what names the technique.

Another recurring metonymic association is one in which the part stands for the whole. Examples are terms like *banda* (flank throw), which indicates the type of (sideways) step-in used for that move, *cintura desprezada* (a series of partner-boosted throws and flips), where the midriff (*cintura*) plays a functional role, *boca-de-calça* (pant-cuffs takedown), describes where the technique is applied. Other expressions, like your palm, and the toes used in a front snap kick (*palma* and *ponteira*) reveal the main body parts employed – often the ones that strike the adversary.

Terms such as *negativa*, *vingativa* and *resistência*, (negative, avenger and resistance) describe the technique in subjective, abstract terms; terms that show the player's strategy and the combative nature of the game. Negation, that is, resistance against slavery, and vengeance for its oppression – these underlie the names given to those moves.

Irony, humor and resistance are all inherent to the lifestyles of capoeira practitioners. This was especially true when the sport was still the target of persecution. Another example of tongue-in-cheek irony is the expression *godeme*, synonymous with the English-style punch, and drawing on the British penchant for shouting “God damn it!” At least that's the way they were perceived by construction workers in the northeastern part of Brazil.

According to anthropologist Letícia Reis, whose 1993 paper was titled *Negros e brancos no jogo da capoeira: reinvenção da tradição*, capoeira constructs a topsy-turvy world with its floor-crawling, bottom-up movements, its subversive laughter, inverted meanings for terms like *bênção*/blessing – and for the resistance running deep within the culture. Her emphasis is on the resistance capoeira puts up – resistance transmitted through its body language, its tricky inverted movements, and its made-up names.

As for the possibility that African languages influenced capoeira terminology, leaving aside the controversial etymology

of terms like *aú* and *gingar*, this last ascribed by Nei Lopes to the *Quimundo jangala* (to wobble), in the *Dicionário Banto do Brasil* (1995), there is no evidence that the African roots of this style have given it any kind of linguistic heritage. This observation lends support to the opinion that capoeira developed in Brazil, rather than through the importation of some pre-existing African martial style.

The naming conventions adopted in capoeira reflect its martial features, its resistance to the oppression of slavery and prejudice, the circular nature of its bouts, the communion between man and nature and, above all, the way it expresses Brazilian culture.

## Bibliography

ABREU, Plácido. *Os capoeiras*. Rio de Janeiro: J. Alves, [1886?]

BURLAMAQUI, Annibal (Zuma). *Gymnastica nacional (capoeiragem) methodizada e regrada*. Rio de Janeiro, 1928.

FERREIRA, Aurélio B. de H. *Novo Aurélio Século XXI: o dicionário da língua portuguesa*. 3rd Ed. totalmente revisada e ampliada. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1999.

GUIA DO CAPOEIRA OU GYMNASTICA BRAZILEIRA. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Nacional, 1907.

LOPES, Nei. *Dicionário banto do Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Secretaria Municipal da Cultura, Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro, 1995.

REIS, Letícia V. de S. *Negros e brancos no jogo da capoeira: reinvenção da tradição*. Dissertation (Master's in Sociology) – College of Philosophy, Fine Arts and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 1993.

ANJOS, Eliane D. *Glossário Terminológico Ilustrado de Movimentos e Golpes da Capoeira: um estudo término-lingüístico*. Dissertation (M.A. in Fine Arts, Philology and Portuguese) – College of Philosophy, Fine Arts and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2003.

RUGENDAS, Johann M. (1802-1858). *Viagem pitoresca através do Brasil*. Translation by Sérgio Milliet. São Paulo: Martins Editora & Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972.

**Illustrations:** Reinaldo Uezima.

**Eliane Dantas dos Anjos.** M.A. in Fine Arts, Philology and Portuguese – College of Philosophy, Fine Arts and Humanities of the University of São Paulo.