

INTERVIEW:
MRS. ROSÂNGELA C. ARAÚJO
(MESTRA JANJA)

Rosângela Costa Araújo, known as Mestre Janja, is one of the most recognizable figures in the world of capoeira. With a degree in History at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and a doctorate in Education at the University of São Paulo (USP), she has dedicated over twenty years of her life to capoeira, whether in its academic strand or in its daily practice. In this interview, given to the Texts from Brazil magazine, Mestre Janja shares her opinions on the inclusion of women in the world of capoeira, the changes that affected this world in the past few years, and the challenges and directions that capoeira will face in the future

TB: Many specialists point to capoeira as one of the most authentically Brazilian cultural manifestations. Just what features of capoeira, in your opinion, reveal this Brazilian idiosyncrasy?

Janja: For starters, I would like to approach capoeira as an Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestation. This is very important to me, for deep down, I don't really believe we should go on thinking of Brazil without its "African-ness." That said, I believe that capoeira as an art reveals Brazilians' way of being, their creative ways of relating to contexts that are often quite violent.

That is how our "gingar," entered the language as more than a specific capoeira movement; it means the ability to live with and face adversity through a mimetic blend of dance and fighting, and to transform negative stereotypes into communal joy.

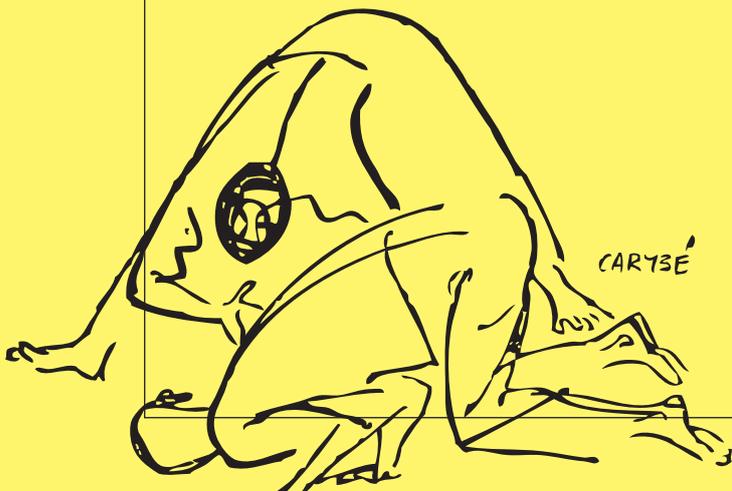
TB: You have dedicated over 20 years to this world of capoeira. What were the most important changes, with regard to capoeira, that you noticed during that time?

Janja: Yes I have been involved with capoeira for about the past 25 years and, fortunately, was in a position to become familiar with part of its development in many Brazilian states, as well as a number of other countries. What impressed me most were the changes in the way many of the groups got along, and especially the *mestres*. It was this possibility of being able to work together, and engage many different audiences in dialogue, including government entities – all of which may not eliminate traditional distrust, but it does show us some new ways of getting along. The increasing number of women as participants is another important phenomenon to be examined and discussed.

TB: Women have achieved considerable independence and freedom that they did not have, in many areas of life, until the mid-20th century. What signs of progress do you consider important with regard to the question of women participating in capoeira circles, or *rodas*.

Janja: I should begin by pointing out that even before showing up at capoeira circles, women also face a different set of hurdles on the way to becoming capoeiristas and being recognized as such.

That capoeira is no longer something specifically for men – assuming it ever was – is not news to anyone. Today we have capoeira organizations founded and led by women, and even groups, especially overseas, in which women form the majority. The playing field is not at all level or representative, however, when we look at the small number of women promoted by the graduation system. We have seen groups, based on "traditions" they themselves made up, claim that women can't play the conga drums or be lead singers for the





Mestra Janja

ladainha, even though these very things are required of them daily in the course of their training and studies in capoeira. The capoeira circle is where the groups put their identity, strength and competence on display. Instead of independence, what women go through are a host of different types of oppression and violence, both actual and symbolic. This has led to the organization of a number of groups, in different countries, working to bring these issues into open debate and putting together separate solidarity and teaching networks. So in that sense, we have to understand capoeira as something in constant dialogue with the society around it, as the “smaller circle” inside of the “larger circle,” and that all the struggles faced by women in society as a whole are gone through in the world of capoeira as well.

TB: What are the obstacles to be overcome by women in capoeira?

Janja: This may be a good time to stand that question on its head, and ask what obstacles capoeira must overcome in order to properly and respectfully bring women into its circle. That way we can bring a couple of relevant issues into the context, namely: diversity and the right to equal treatment. This is a challenge capoeira

ought to take up, given that the feminine presence extends from the development of the core knowledge defining such specific requirements as movements, rhythms, songs, and the history and philosophy of capoeira, and so forth, through the unquestioned ability to organize and manage groups as cultural, educational and political organizations both within capoeira and in the larger social context. Yet if we are to make any progress, we must understand that capoeira has to incorporate new viewpoints into its aesthetic diversity. Just as in groups traditionally run by men there is a lot of emphasis on aesthetic diversity, to define and give each group and each mestre a sense of identity, by the same token women want to be valued, to put together their own backdrops, and not necessarily mimic – down to the physical details – concepts that are not representative of feminine codes.

TB: We quite often hear that a capoeira student’s education ought to be holistic, that is, to go beyond its technical and physical elements and also include moral and ethical training. What are the values that capoeira is able to foster in its adepts?

Janja: People who want to be initiated in the practice of capoeira ought to first receive an introduction to the practice of capoeira. This is because, since capoeira is a community practice (I’m speaking of capoeira Angola), its historical and philosophical aspects are bound up in shaping the identity of the group. In other words, a good place to begin is to situate both the group and the person within the same network of belonging. From that point forward, such values as rank, heritage, cooperation, respect for differences, etc., are grasped as values that situate the person within that individual’s own community. Here I’d like to restate the character-building aspect of capoeira. To be a *capoeirista* is something that brings together more than physical ability or musical talent, but also conduct that

reflects the teachings and guidance of one’s group.

TB: Capoeira has proven itself a useful vehicle for inclusion and social cohesion. What features of capoeira make these aspects possible? What would you say are currently the most important initiatives in that direction.

Janja: Yes, capoeira has played an important role in bonding together cultural communities, especially among children and youngsters living on the outskirts of the urban centers. In addition to the various levels of attraction and involvement it provides, capoeira has benefited immensely from the dedication and initiative of the people involved in its preservation and expansion.

We are fortunate today in that the government, beginning with initiatives at the federal level, has increasingly recognized the social importance of capoeira through programs, announcements and statements on the record, so that groups and associations far from the dominant cultural centers are able to have the larger capoeira community take notice of their work. Among these initiatives we might point up the official recognition of capoeira as part of our intangible cultural heritage, under the guidance of Brazil’s National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), and the Living Culture, Points of Culture, Living Capoeira and similar programs under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture (MinC) – this is in addition to public policies at the municipal level in several cities. Overseas, in addition to the Ministry of Culture’s proposed Global Capoeira Program, much work has been done by *mestres* and groups, in many different countries, to work more closely with teaching establishments and dedicated cultural initiatives.

TB: What virtues do you believe a good capoeirista ought to possess?

Janja: Rhythm, and the ability to also be flexible within that “larger circle.”

Openness, to keep his or her skills current. Responsibility in one's choice of teachings, never losing sight of that well-rounded education as capoeiristas. Unwavering exercise of tolerance and friendliness. Respect for differences.

TB: Your doctoral thesis, in 2004, was on the subject of capoeira. Until fairly recently, however, many capoeiristas looked askance at academic research, for they believed that the world of capoeira and that of academia held disparate value systems. What is the current status of those relations?

Janja: I hardly believe that those sort of misgivings are at all specific to *capoeiristas*. Note that initiatives in other traditions having African roots, such as *candomblé*, only become accepting of academic studies once they themselves have been included in that milieu. Thus, we find today, in many capoeira groups in Brazil and abroad, academic and non-academic researchers carrying out and publishing studies seminal to capoeira. Bear in mind, too, that groups organized by capoeira researchers are also part of that profile: the Capoeira Studies Group (GECA), national in scope, brings together the bulk of all capoeiristas, some of them doing graduate work, with others involved in teaching at universities. Then there is the Mestre Noronha Study Group, a Project of the Jair Moura Institute in Salvador.

TB: There are many wings and factions in this universe of capoeira. Do you believe all this diversity could be taken as indicative of capoeira's cultural complexity, and hence, of the complexity of Brazilian culture?

Janja: Unquestionably, and that may be its greatest asset today. Many different frames of reference must be brought together to account for the myriad possibilities and approaches open to capoeira. Even so, we have to be concerned over certain hybrids that amount to a disfig-

urement of capoeira. Instead of busying ourselves about making up names for new brands and registering those trademarks, we could better devote our efforts to uncovering, among the complex folds of capoeira itself, infinite possibilities for working in combination with others in related areas (the arts, health, education, law, etc.).

TB: Capoeira has been rapidly gaining popularity all over the world. What do you think lies at the bottom of all this success? What is your take on this globalization of capoeira?

Janja: I believe capoeira keeps the soul of youth alive within us. It is fertile ground for individual and group forms of expression, very attractive for their versatility, musical nature and other cohesive aspects. That much is seen in the extent to which children, youngsters and adults from different origins, cultures, and social strata, devote themselves entirely to its teachings, seeking familiarity with its networks of belonging – all of which lead back to Brazil – and together forming a fantastic human mosaic able to bring together people who would otherwise be separated by the very inequalities and conflict through which these differences are dealt with inside the global political context.

Furthermore, I think it's important for these new capoeiristas to reflect on and understand the historic and political meaning of capoeira, so that it does not get papered over with additional layers of folkloric attributions, or be re-interpreted, by oversimplification, into sporting events. After all, there is no majority among capoeiristas in favor of turning it into an Olympic sport. By the same token, capoeira should keep close to its roots as a means of preserving it among the fighting styles of the black people of Brazil, in their struggle for freedom.

TB: What are the stereotypes that capoeira and capoeiristas still have to cope with?

Janja: I believe there are stereotypes

that ought to be faced by society as much as by the government. Brazilian society must recognize and stand up for its African-ness as something central to the establishment of its national identity. Governments, meanwhile, ought to determine the procedures needed to bring about that recognition, whether by revising the content of textbooks and all other literary works, or by providing incentives – or even taking the initiative to see that the work needed to teach those lessons is properly done.

TB: What are the challenges that capoeira faces today?

Janja: To divest itself of nationalistic and cultural feelings, and other types of intolerance that feed racism, sexism and xenophobia. We must keep capoeira from being contaminated by the very political violence we seek to eliminate from the "larger circle." Capoeira must make its way by fostering freedom and equality, and, despite its international insertion, weigh current trends in the direction of mass-culture and mass-marketing.

