

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAPOEIRA AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION OVER THE COURSE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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THE APPROACH I WILL FOLLOW HERE IS PATTERNED AFTER A CAPOEIRA CIRCLE, WHERE SPECTATORS OBSERVE THE TECHNIQUES, FUN AND GAMES AND PRESENTATIONS – ALONG WITH THE TENSION PERMEATING THE BOUT ITSELF. I HAVE TRIED TO CALL ATTENTION TO OBSERVATIONS MADE DURING MANY TURNS “AROUND THE WORLD”<sup>1</sup> AT CAPOEIRA CIRCLE CEREMONIES AND AS A RESEARCHER IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION.<sup>2</sup> THIS IS A LOOK AT THE 20TH CENTURY THROUGH THE EYES OF A RESEARCHER/CAPOEIRISTA.

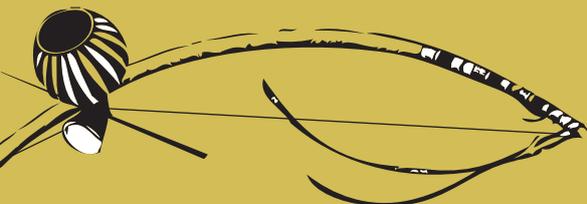


(1) *Volta do mundo* (around the world) is a verse sung in the opening litany (*adainha*) at a capoeira bout. It is a signal to begin the contest, and also stands for the many possible techniques that can come into play during capoeira circle bouts. Several writers, including Leticia V. S. Reis (1997) draw parallels between the capoeira circle and events in our daily lives, so that the expression may also refer to what people do as they go through life.

(2) Here I will capitalize Physical Education to denote the field of study, and use lowercase, physical education, to refer to the pedagogical discipline responsible for the teaching approach employed in subjects involving physical development.

The commingling of capoeira and Physical Education appears to have begun in the 20th century, when not only Physical Education teachers, but also other educators and the Armed Forces were casting about for ways to include capoeira in the fast-growing world of sports, and adapt it to the methods of gymnastics.

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The foundation for this analysis was my Master's thesis in Physical Education, written under the guidance of Dr. Lino Castellani Filho. My purpose there being to understand, as a starting point, how researchers in the field have appropriated studies on the practice of capoeira in society, and the practice itself. Three additional issues enter the analysis, namely, the history of capoeira in society, whether it developed parallel to Physical Education or their paths crossed, and if so, where and when? The third issue is an attempt to identify by what standard those involved in regulating physical education and/or capoeira justify placing capoeira, professionally, within the purview of Federal and Regional Boards of Physical Education.

The search for these answers began with a bibliographical research on the topic of capoeira in the fields of Physical Education, History, Anthropology and Sociology, as well as among books devoted to capoeira.<sup>3</sup> Every effort was made to supplement the material examined, by including data from original sources in the form of magazine articles on the subject over the past 20 years.

It turns out that all debate on the subject was steeped in the history of capoeira, as practiced in our society, inasmuch as it provided the background for being able to understand the development of this visible and culturally representative social aspect of Brazil. By picking up the thread of its historical development I was able to draw parallels between capoeira and Physical Education as they were developed.

Capoeira traces its origins to African slaves brought to Brazil, who, beginning in the 16th century, organized a great many cultural activities on Brazilian soil, rites such as *candomblé*, *samba*, *congada* and *maracatu*, to name a few. Capoeira stands out because of its rapid spread in recent years to countries on every continent. The practice itself may be regarded as a combination martial art, dance, entertainment, play-acting, game and sport.

The commingling of capoeira and Physical Education appears to have begun in the 20th century, when not only Physical Education teachers, but also other educators and the Armed Forces were casting about for ways to include capoeira in the fast-growing world of sports, and adapt it to the methods of gymnastics.<sup>4</sup> The main thrust of these writers, some of them actual capoeira enthusiasts, was to turn it into a type of sport or defensive fighting style representative of Brazil as a nation, hence the exaltation of its national roots.

(3) By world of capoeira I mean everything produced by capoeira mestres, teachers and adepts outside of academic circles.

(4) The foothold physical education established in Brazil was connected directly with European gymnastics methods, which became increasingly popular in Brazil beginning in the early 20th century. Their purpose here, as in their countries of origin, was physical discipline in an effort to strengthen the population for factory production, and to establish policies for public health and hygiene without the added bother of turning basic water & wastewater and medical care into policy issues. For more information on gymnastics as practiced in Brazil, see *Educação Física: raízes européias e Brasil*, by Carmem Lúcia Soares, 1994 and *Educação Física no Brasil: a história que não se conta*, by Lino Castellani Filho, 2000.



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The proposition was couched in nationalistic discourse, hewing closely to the health and hygiene policies very fashionable in the opening years of the 20th century, and, in effect, called for the practice of a capoeira stripped of its *black* and *working-class* heritage.<sup>5</sup> In this, one can still make out an opportunity for *rapprochement* between two very different social strata, the “haves,” which included those same authors, and the “have-nots,” made up largely of freedmen and workmen. This came about because talk of the “disciplining” of capoeira served, to an extent, to rekindle interest in the sport among members of the subject classes. After all, the practice of capoeira in public places had been outlawed by Brazil’s 1890 Criminal Code.

It was within this context that arguments in favor of legitimizing capoeira were put forth by both sides, yet proponents were in complete disagreement as to how this legitimacy would be exercised. The more genteel argued for the organization of capoeira along the lines of the Zuma Method, that is, as a sport – overall, much like boxing. The working class parried this by endorsing venues traditional to the black population, such as backyard parties and street festivals. No relationship between physical education and capoeira, however, had yet surfaced, at least not clearly and unequivocally.

Not until 1945 were the first steps taken toward appropriating and finding new meaning for capoeira through

physical education. The process began with efforts by Professor Inezil Penna Marinho to develop a methodology for training in capoeira, based on the Zuma Method. Interestingly enough, this coincided with the decriminalization of this type of cultural exhibition during the Getúlio Vargas Administration, in the 1930s. Here again we see a struggle between disparate social classes over who will appropriate capoeira. The proposal placed on the table by capoeira mestres<sup>6</sup> and practitioners, couched in terms compatible with its black and working-class origins – particularly by the representatives of the lower classes of Salvador (Bahia) – gained acceptance, to the discomfiture of Professor Inezil’s backers. Nevertheless, there is no denying the influence of physical education and sports in the overarching framework adopted for capoeira, a framework based on the ideas of the *baiano mestres*. A perusal of the writings of Frederico José de Abreu<sup>7</sup> and Antônio Liberac C. S. Pires<sup>8</sup> shows

(5) *Black* and *working-class* refer to the way capoeira is practiced and thought of as an offshoot of African traditions in Brazil, this is difficult to pigeonhole. *White* and *cultured* serves to describe it from the standpoint of its inclusion as a Brazilian gymnastics form, national martial art or legitimate Brazilian sport. For a more thorough discussion of how these expressions were coined and debated, see Letícia V. S. Reis, in her 1997 book *O mundo de pernas para o ar: a capoeira no Brasil*.

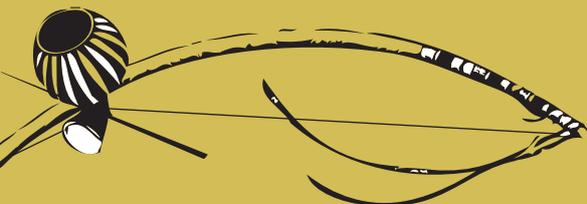
(6) A *capoeira mestre* is the person responsible for teaching this method and safeguarding its traditions.

(7) ABREU, Frederico José de. *Bimba é bamba: a capoeira no ringue*. Salvador: Instituto Jair Moura, 1999.

(8) PIRES, Antônio Liberac Cardoso Simões. *Movimentos da cultura afro-brasileira: a formação histórica da capoeira contemporânea (1890 – 1950)*. 2001. (Doctoral thesis in History) - Philosophy and Social Science Institute (IFCH), Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas.

We see then that the first substantive give-and-take between capoeira and Physical Education occurred when capoeira practitioners appropriated the prestige enjoyed at the time by Physical Education, in order to give shape to their ideas concerning this expression of cultural identity.

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that it was precisely from a sporting approach that capoeira mestres and adepts first demonstrated the possibility of this particular style holding its own as a sport, through the admission of capoeira into ring fights. After that, training and classes were organized throughout the 1930s under the aegis of physical education, a strategy that would later bring capoeira to the forefront, in the lead role, as Brazilian Physical Education.

We see then that the first substantive give-and-take between capoeira and Physical Education occurred when capoeira practitioners appropriated the prestige enjoyed at the time by Physical Education, in order to give shape to their ideas concerning this expression of cultural identity. Interestingly enough, the mestres in Salvador were the ones who put forward their own interpretations on the interrelationship between Physical Education and sports, and related those ideas to the practice of capoeira. That much is plain from the words of Mestre Pastinha:<sup>9</sup> “[...] frankly, the time is ripe to press for the sport.<sup>10</sup> My intention was not to make myself out as better than my comrades, but rather, to elevate the sport.” Mestre Bimba advocated his method in similar terms: “I have hanging on my wall a permit from the Board of Education. I’m a physical education teacher. Nobody can lay a hand on me.”<sup>11</sup> As a result of this interplay with government interests, all the while defending the practice of capoeira on populist grounds,<sup>12</sup> we note the emergence in the 1940s of a *grassroots teaching style*<sup>13</sup> for this expression of cultural form.

Even as the mestres were making sport of the pretensions of polite society – represented here by the proponents of sports and physical education – they gave capoeira a makeover more in tune with their own interests. The mestres were thus able to reinvent their tradition and put the discourse around capoeira on track as a legitimate contribution by black people in Bahia toward building a national culture. As these arguments moved to the forefront, the estimation of capoeira as a broad-based cultural expression increased proportionately, without prejudice to its African origins, and with no restrictions placed on its sporting nature or value as a means of personal defense. Observe that the mestres in Bahia extracted their full measure from the ambiguous nature of capoeira, and consequently of its practice, for they by no means denied its value as a sport, but throughout their entire discourse, kept it from being pinned down by alternately describing it as a martial art, a

(9) Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, Mestre Pastinha, and Manoel dos Reis Machado, Mestre Bimba, were legendary pioneers of capoeira in Bahia, successful in getting capoeira removed from the 1890 criminal code, and who managed to secure its acceptance by Brazilian society at large beginning in the 1930s.

(10) FILHO, 1997 apud PIRES, 2001, op. cit., p. 282

(11) ABREU, 1999, op. cit., p. 30.

(12) Mestre Pastinha and some of his contemporaries used to sing a little ditty that ran: “Capoeira is for men, women and children. Only those who don’t want in remain outside.”

(13) The expression *pedagogia popular* was suggested by Letícia Vidor de Souza Reis (1997) in order to point up the differences between the grassroots method of teaching used by the capoeira mestres, and the so-called cultured method derived from the discipline of Physical Education, and which reflected the predominant social influence of that era.



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dance, a musical performance, a style of personal defense, a philosophy for living, etc.

So, although in the the first round of the contest, grassroots capoeira teaching techniques prevailed over Physical Education, it wasn't long before new proposals cropped up, arguing for its inclusion among the various sports, as well as in the category of martial arts.

One of these proposals sprang from a partnership between physical education and the Armed Forces, a partnership by no means unusual throughout the entire 20th century. In the 1960s First Lt. Lamartine Pereira da Costa became the second person connected to Physical Education to recommend the addition of capoeira for personal defense, the first having been Fernando de Azevedo, in his book on physical education, *Physical Education: what it is, what it has been, and what it ought to be (followed by Antinous)*. Lamartine Pereira da Costa suggested in his proposal that capoeira be included as part of military training in combatives for the Navy. As part of this initiative he penned *Capoeira sem mestre*, a self-study course in the art. In it he made clear his desire to enter upon the jurisdiction of the established *capoeira mestres*. These ideas, however, amounted to no more than another failed attempt on the part of physical education to appropriate capoeira.

The 1960s and 70s were years of tumultuous change in Brazil, beginning with the *coup* that established military rule in 1964. Among the events of the times was the increased appeal of physical education as a means of letting off steam generated by possible "transgressions" in government, mainly through the uplifting of pro-sport movements. The process is discussed in a revealing book on physical education written by Lino Castellani Filho, *Physical Education in Brazil: the untold story*. It tells of the renewed commingling of physical education and capoeira arising from a pro-sports attitude shift within capoeira, tracking the changes then taking place in physical education.

The 1970s ushered in the clearest and most visible sign of the pro-sports shift in capoeira with its inclusion as a sport within the Brazilian Boxing Confederation, and the organization of capoeiristas into groups. The capoeira mestre remained the central figure within the hierarchy of these groups, but new rules were written for capoeira, similar to those in place for other types of sports.

The historical record does show, however, that the pro-sports faction within capoeira gained the upper hand. This threw the gates open to the influence of physical education, itself closely bound up with the trend toward sports. This first victory of physical education over capoeira was by no means, however, a definitive rout. There was anything but wholesale consensus among the various organized capoeira groups that to march single-file into the Brazilian Boxing Confederation was to be a good sport. This, then, is considered the crucial moment at which key events unfolded, events that enable us to understand the changes which then occurred within this cultural form. The disagreements among the various groups paved the way for innovative proposals which, years later, would cause scholars from many fields to reconsider capoeira in our society. An example of the backlash came in the form of *Capoeira Esporte*, which breathed new life into the ideas of mestre Pastinha and his capoeira Angola style.<sup>14</sup>

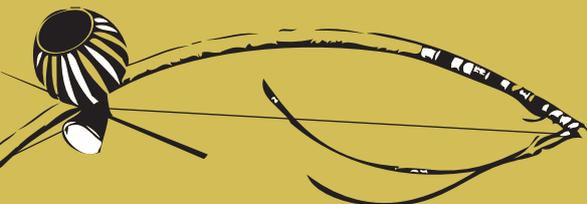
This backlash on the part of the various and sundry capoeira groups and organizations, amounting to open revolt against the rules set forth by the Brazilian Boxing Confederation, made it clear that relations between physical education and capoeira would have to be differentiated rather than monolithic. Nor may we lose sight of the fact that these relations, over the years, were to become even more complex, for even as this new perspective weighed in the balance, other capoeira groups began to endorse the idea that the practice ought to be standardized as a type of sport. To this were added even more points of contention during the 1980s, with the resurgence of the earlier ideas, propounded by advocates of gymnastics, for linking capoeira to physical education.

A number of different situations were here folded together within a single context. The by-now-familiar professor Inezil Penna Marinho was back again in 1982 pressing for the inclusion of capoeira as part of Brazilian gymnastics. The capoeira-as-sport lobby wanted to keep the practice listed among the sports. And there was a concurrent movement, having ties to Physical Education and headed up by some of its intellectuals, who were bent on reworking ca-

(14) Although Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Bimba both struggled to have capoeira removed from the list of activities banned by the Criminal Code, the two differed in their formulation of approaches to its practice. Mestre Bimba went forward with what he called a regional capoeira style, known as Capoeira regional, based on adaptations from a number of cultural techniques such as batuque, and capoeira as it was then practiced, and mixing in techniques from other sports and martial arts. Mestre Pastinha adopted an ethnocentric approach, known as Capoeira Angola, based on capoeira as it had been practiced up to that time, with very few changes.

We note in passing that capoeira has come to be valued by exponents of Physical Education as a visible marker of Brazilian culture. This stems from the development, beginning in 1980, of new paradigms in the study of Physical Education.

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poeira's role in society. And if this were not enough, tucked in among these disparate paths were capoeira groups who wanted the practice to remain a cultural art, free from the rules and regulations of legal institutions.

The Gordian knot began loosening up in some directions while others remained unchanged. There are still people, with connections to capoeira organizations, who support the idea of preserving capoeira as a cultural exhibition with no ties to government agencies, but they are in the minority. For one thing their champions do not present their arguments clearly, then there is the obvious difficulty in keeping this a tenable position with no institutional support, whether by sports agencies or industries having ties to art, schools, etc. Furthermore, cultural exhibitions that are part of the makeup of the Brazilian people are already ensured legal protection under Brazil's current Constitution. Capoeira, regarded as a cultural manifestation, is therefore already institutionally protected.

We note in passing that capoeira has come to be valued by exponents of Physical Education as a visible marker of Brazilian culture. This stems from the development, beginning in 1980, of new paradigms in the study of Physical Education. One can make out new viewpoints within this movement, some of whose champions recommend that physical education in schools ought to take it up as "Brazilian Physical Development," in accordance with the 1993 *Methodology for Teaching Physical Education*. This proposal appears to be the most consistent put forth from within Physical Education circles because it preserves the historical and social context associated with capoeira, and puts proper emphasis on its practice and study.

Having before us this newfound emphasis on capoeira within the scope of physical education, one might label as *progressive* those physical education teachers who believe more effort and attention should be devoted to that style. In published works of the 1990s<sup>15</sup> we see a strengthening of mutual ties in agendas for situations in which, on the one hand the capoeira master is valued for knowledge of the form, and on the other, physical education teachers gain added prestige for working to include capoeira as part of their curricula. This way of doing things is by no means the norm for either side, but rather, something restricted to a few professionals willing to tread that path. Still, in all, this may be one of the most fertile and rewarding approaches for working capoeira into physical education classes.

We would point out in closing that the most rewarding interrelationship, both in terms of cultural benefits to capoeira and the ways the field of Physical Education stands to benefit from capoeira, is the teaching of a practice en-

(15) I may cite FALCÃO, José Luiz. *A escolarização da capoeira*. Brasília: ASEFE Royal Court, 1996; REIS, André Luiz Teixeira. *Brincando de Capoeira: recreação e lazer na escola*. Brasília: Valcy, 1997 and de ROCHA, Maria Angélica. *Capoeira uma proposta para a educação física escolar*. 1990. Monograph (Majoring in Physical Education Teaching) - College of Physical Education, Universidade Estadual de Campinas.

lightened by the awareness of its having built itself out of the story of a people who, although brought over in chains to Brazil, still had the dignity and the cultural strength to enrich our heritage with a legacy of fighting with a smile, dancing through struggles, telling their story in songs and recalling their ancestors in a corporal style we call capoeira.

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