

THE METAMORPHOSES OF CAPOEIRA: TOWARD A HISTORY OF CAPOEIRA

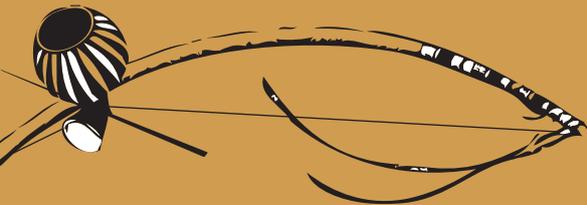
GUILHERME FRAZÃO CONDURU

THIS ARTICLE ENDEAVORS TO TRACE BACK AND RECONSTRUCT THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CAPOEIRA AND IDENTIFY DECISIVE MOMENTS, TURNING POINTS AFTER WHICH THE ROLES OF CAPOEIRA AND ITS PRACTITIONERS WERE CHANGED IN POPULAR PERCEPTION AND IN ACTUAL FACT. OUR INVESTIGATION MUST, AT THE OUTSET, CLARIFY WHAT IS MEANT BY CAPOEIRA. IN OTHER WORDS IT SHOULD CONVEY THE CONTENT OF THE PRACTICE PLAYED TODAY AS THE "ART OF CAPOEIRA." CAPOEIRA IS ENGAGED IN AT CLUBS, "SCHOOLS" AND ON THE STREETS, AS A SPORT INVOLVING PHYSICAL TRAINING IN PREPARATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN A "CAPOEIRA CIRCLE," OR RODA. THERE ARE NO HARD AND FAST RULES, YET IT DOES FOLLOW A CHARACTERISTIC PROTOCOL, WITH ITS OWN MUSIC, IN WHICH THE INSTRUMENT THAT SETS THE TEMPO AND DRIVES THE PERFORMANCE INSIDE THE CIRCLE IS THE MUSICAL BOW OR BERIMBAU. THE ENDURING FEATURE – BUT IT ALSO BRINGS OUT A VERY LARGE DANCE COMPONENT, ALBEIT SUBORDINATED TO THE BUSINESS OF ELUDING AND OUTWITTING ONE'S PARTNER/OPPONENT. IN THIS WE SEE THE MARTIAL COMPONENT, WHICH ENTAILS BODILY CONTACT, BUT NOT NECESSARILY VICTOR AND VANQUISHED. BY BINDING TOGETHER THESE ELEMENTS OF SPORT, MUSIC, DANCE, MARTIAL SKILLS AND JOYFUL CAMARADERIE, CAPOEIRA COMPRISES ONE OF THE MOST OPULENT MANIFESTATIONS OF BRAZIL'S POPULAR CULTURE.



Foreigners visited Brazil in increasing numbers after the Portuguese Royal Family arrived in 1808, and the writings they left behind have proven invaluable in reconstructing the society and customs then prevailing. Among these writings, those of Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858) appear to include the earliest description of capoeira (1835).

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Observe, however, that the above definition is historically dependent. To attempt to apply it indiscriminately – for instance, to capoeira as practiced during the Second Empire (1840-1890)¹ – would be anachronistic. In what follows we will identify several metamorphoses capoeira has undergone, and examine transformations in the way capoeira fit in with society at large.

1. EARLY REFERENCES (CIRCA 1770-1830). Some claim that capoeira has been practiced since the time of the runaway slave outpost known as Quilombo dos Palmares (17th century).² Associating capoeira with the history of black resistance to slavery is intriguing. Was it more than simple horseplay, in which slaves could, at least momentarily, distract themselves from their wretched plight? Might it also have been a weapon with which to prosecute the struggle for freedom? Current historical research shows us no signs of capoeira being practiced by “*quilombolas*”, fugitive slaves who found refuge in fastnesses known as *quilombos*.³ At best, we may find references back to the latter half of the 18th Century, in urban surroundings at that.

Luis Edmundo, in his memoirs, describes the capoeira player during the Vice-Kingdom of Brazil (1763 - 1808) as a sly, taciturn adventurer who nevertheless paid homage to the holy figures at the ubiquitous public shrines that dotted colonial Rio de Janeiro.⁴

Elísio de Araújo’s history of the police force in that old colonial capital⁵ offers a different perspective – less literary but more persuasive. Citing *O ilustrado Dr. J. M. Macedo*, without naming his source, he claimed that:

Back in the time of the Marquis de Lavradio, in 1770, there was a militia officer, Second Lt. João Moreira, nicknamed “the mutineer,” a brawny and ill-tempered man who was perhaps the first of the capoeira fighters in Rio de Janeiro; albeit an impeccable swordsman and fighter with knife or club, he preferred the tactics of headbutts and blows with the feet.

The report suggests that “the mutineer” was perhaps a forerunner to the celebrated Major Vidigal, right-hand-man to Brazil’s first Police Commissioner, Conselheiro Paulo Fernandes Viana, himself appointed by Dom João, the Prince Regent. Vidigal entered history as a character in *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, known for his “inquisitorial”⁶ police

(1) Editor’s Note: The Second Empire covers a period of 49 years in the history of Brazil. It extended from 1840, when D. Pedro II was declared of legal age and enthroned as the second Emperor of Brazil, until November 15 1889, when Brazil was proclaimed a republic.

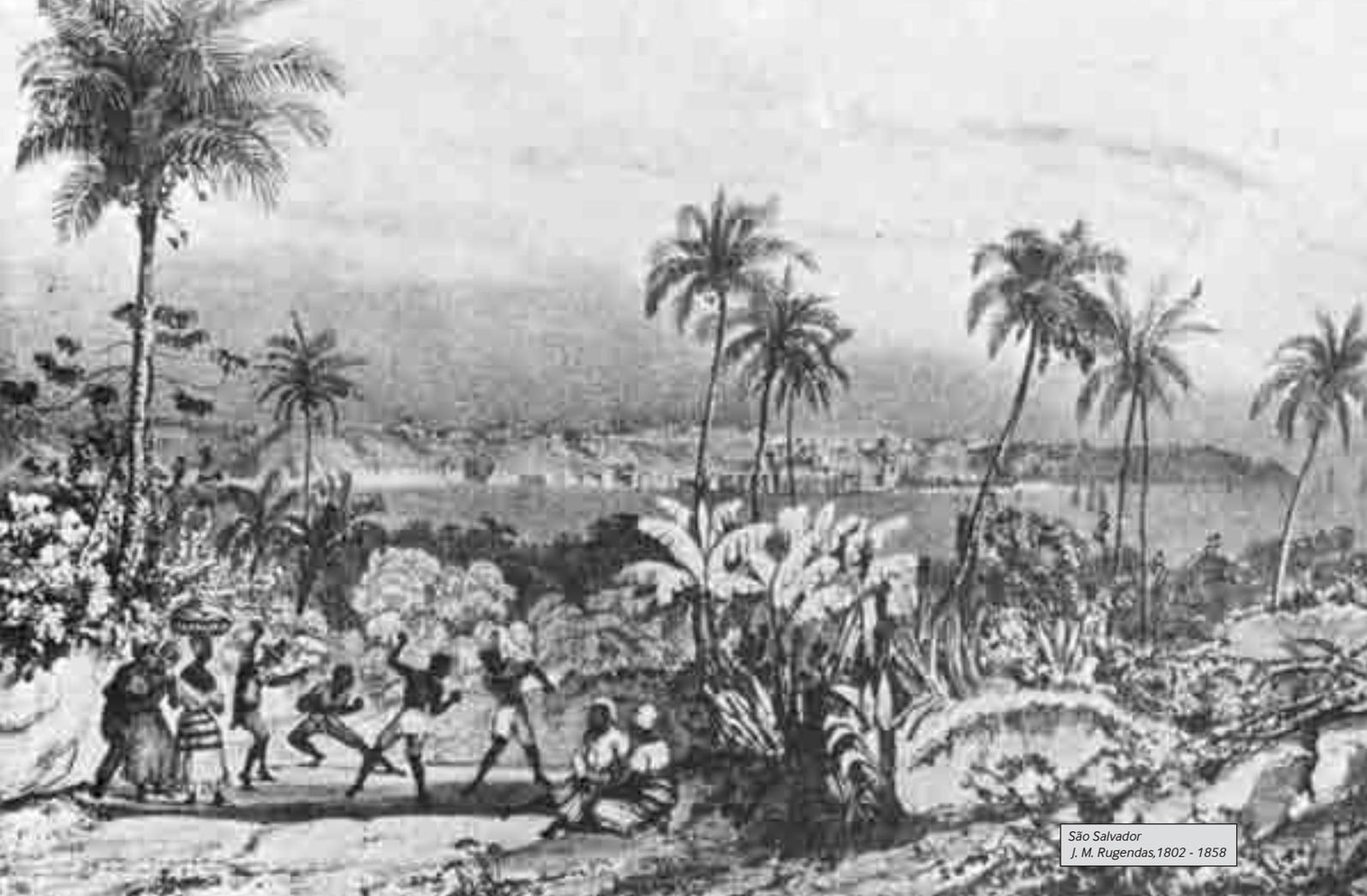
(2) See, for instance, the newspaper interview with Mestre Almir das Areias by *Movimento* on 09/13/1976, cited by Roberto Freire in *Soma, uma terapia anarquista*, Vol. 2/*Prática da Soma e capoeira*, pp. 160-168, Editora Guanabara-Koogan, Rio de Janeiro, 1991. The movie *Quilombo* (1983), directed by Cacá Diegues, includes scenes suggestive of capoeira fighting techniques.

(3) See *Memorial de Palmares*, by Ivan Alves Filho, Xénon Editores, Rio de Janeiro, 1988.

(4) See *O Rio de Janeiro no tempo dos Vice-Reis*, Athena Editora, Rio de Janeiro, undated.

(5) See *Estudo histórico sobre a Polícia da Capital Federal de 1808 a 1831*, First part, Imprensa Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 1898, p. 56.

(6) See *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias de Manuel Antônio de Almeida*, Irmãos Pongetti Editores, Rio de Janeiro, 1963, preface by Marques Rebêlo, p. 28.



São Salvador
J. M. Rugendas, 1802 - 1858

tactics. Vidigal was notorious for persistently antagonizing the black community's fugitive slaves, *candomblés*⁷ and capoeira practitioners, and is credited with having originated a terrible series of tortures known as the "Cameroon delight,"⁸ reserved especially for capoeira practitioners and vagrants, considered a nuisance throughout the city.

Although the nation's first criminal code – The Criminal Code of the Empire of Brazil, of 1830 – made no specific reference to capoeiras, they were presumed to fit the description of "bums and mendicants," under Chapter IV, Article 295.⁹ Indeed, capoeira practitioners were stigmatized as gang members, vagrants or actual delinquents. How the social stigma branding them as pariahs can be reconciled with notions of "harmless entertainment" on the part of slaves and freedmen is an issue that merits examination.

Foreigners visited Brazil in increasing numbers after the Portuguese Royal Family arrived in 1808, and the writings they left behind have proven invaluable in reconstructing the society and customs then prevailing. Among these writings, those of Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858) appear to include the earliest description of capoeira (1835):

(...) The Negroes have still another warrior sport, considerably more violent, called capoeira: two champions rush toward one another in an effort

*to butt their heads against the chest of the adversary they wish to knock down. These attacks are avoided by equally skillful feints and fakes to either side. Yet it sometimes happens that in charging each other, somewhat like goats, their heads crash together with considerable force, and the horseplay often degenerates into a fight, knives enter the picture, and blood is drawn.*¹⁰

To this description the German artist added two lithographs depicting the practice of capoeira, which – in all likelihood – are the oldest graphic representations of the subject. The first of these was titled *São Salvador*, in honor of the capital of Bahia – visible in the background – as seen from a point near the famous *Igreja do Bonfim*. In the foreground, a group of dusky-skinned people – three men and four women – appear as spectators at a contest between two black contenders. Although there are no musical instruments in

(7) Editor's Note: *Candomblé* denotes the ensemble of ritual practices brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans from the countries now known as Nigeria and Benin.

(8) See Almeida, op. cit.; Waldeloir Rego, *Capoeira angola: ensaio sócio-etnográfico*, Editora Itapuã, Salvador, 1968, p. 295; and Raimundo Magalhães Júnior, *Deodoro: a espada contra o Império*, Cia. Editora Nacional, São Paulo, 1940, vol. 2, p. 183.

(9) See Rego, op. cit., p. 291

(10) Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Viagem pitoresca através do Brasil*, Livraria Martins, São Paulo, 1940, p. 197.

Observe that none of these lithographs shows a *berimbau* bow. From this we may surmise that the instrument was not, at the time, associated with the art of capoeira.¹¹ One technical detail, notable from a fighting style standpoint, is that the contenders in the second engraving have their fists clenched.

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Detail
São Salvador, J.B. Debret

sight, the stance and positions of audience and contestants suffice to convey a throbbing rhythm. One is struck not only by the presence of women, but also that one of them is being officiously wooed by another spectator.

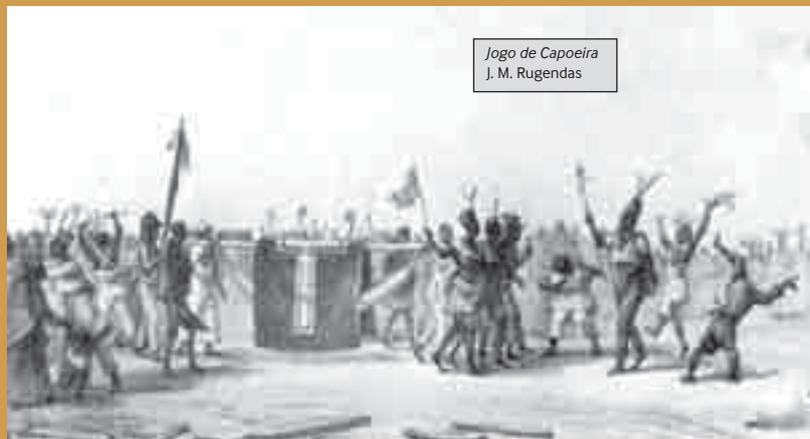
The second engraving, titled *Jogo da capoeira*, depicts a similar audience of predominantly dusky-skinned individuals watching a delightful bout between two contenders. A conga drum is in plain view and one of the spectators is clapping hands. Except for one lady who is serving up a portion of food, everyone – even the lady balancing the basket of pineapples – appears entranced by the rhythm and movements of the capoeiristas. The presence of the peripatetic pineapple-vendor tells us that the setting is urban.

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The work of Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848), though it contains no explicit references to capoeira, nonetheless adds significantly to the historical reconstruction of capoeira through two of his watercolors and their corresponding explanations. In describing the wood panel titled *Funeral of an African king's son*, the French artist wrote:

The procession is begun by the master of ceremonies, who leaves the house of the deceased and, swinging his cane, clears a path through the swarthy crowd blocking the way. Up comes the Negro fireworks man, setting off rockets and firecrackers, and three or four cavorting black tumblers doing numerous backflips and other somersaults to liven up the scene.

It is interesting to note the inclusion, in a funeral procession, of these “black acrobats” whose displays would, in the 20th century, be incorporated into the movements of



Jogo de Capoeira
J. M. Rugendas

(11) See *O berimbau-de-barriga e seus toques*, Kay Shaffer, MEC/FUNARTE/INF, Monografias folclóricas, 1981.



O negro trovador
Uruncungo player
J. B. Debret. 1768 - 1848

capoeira – whether as flourishes with which to confound an opponent, as intimidating moves or even displays of physical skill and ability to please tourists.

In his watercolor titled *Uruncungo player*, Debret depicts an elderly blind Negro playing the urucungo, clearly a *berimbau*.

These African troubadours, possessed of fertile imagination and eloquence in telling tales of love, always closed their candid stanzas with lascivious expressions illustrated by analogous gestures, which never failed to elicit whoops of joy from the entire Negro audience, their applause augmented by whistles, piercing screams, leaping and contortions – demonstrations which, happily, were short-lived, for they quickly fled elsewhere to escape drubbings by military policemen chasing after them with nightsticks.¹²

In support of our earlier conjecture, one may at least surmise, based on Rugendas' engravings, that there was no association between capoeira and the *berimbau*, at least not before the third decade of the 19th century. This is surprising, given the closeness of the association between the two as of the 1930s, if not earlier.

During this period from approximately 1770 through 1830, capoeira may be envisioned from at least two differ-

ent viewpoints. The first of these we may call ethnographic, for lack of a better term, in which this Negro (and therefore African) outdoor entertainment was widespread enough to be reproduced by foreign travelers. Yet from a sociological standpoint, there is no escaping the fact that capoeira was the focus of intensive efforts at suppression on the part of the police. This was because its practitioners, who tended to be slaves or freedmen, were pointed to as muggers and ne'er-do-wells making use of capoeira for the commission of crimes and to cause civil unrest.

2. THE MOB: "PROFESSIONALS" AND STRONG-ARM POLITICS (CIRCA 1830-1890).

Capoeira managed to survive and, despite all suppression efforts, thrive in society during Brazil's Regency Era (1831-40) and The Second Empire (1840-89). Changes occurred at some point, so that it was no longer the exclusive domain of slaves or freedmen. While it is true that blacks and mulattos figure most prominently in the galleries of famous capoeiristas of a century ago; they were not, however, the exclusive purveyors of the art.

In fact, it was due to the failure of repressive efforts to do away with capoeira (along with other manifestations of Negro culture, such as *candomblé* or shamanism) that it

(12) See Debret, *Viagem pitoresca e histórica ao Brasil*, Itatiaia, Belo Horizonte, Edusp, São Paulo, 1989, Book II, pp. 164-165.

Thus, within this context of fraudulent elections, mobsters – as service providers – were in a very real sense “professionals.” Admission into their ranks amounted, in the eyes of impoverished freedmen, to hopes for a livelihood, so that in a general way, recruiting efforts among the layabouts, vagrants and odd-job men tended to fill the ranks of these outfits with the necessary capoeira practitioners.

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Detail
Jogo de Capoeira, J. M. Rugendas

managed to spread to other levels of society during imperial times. It was precisely in the eye of this contradictory whirlwind of criminalization and growing popularity that the capoeira mob emerged. It was no accident that contemporary journalists such as Lima Campos and Coelho Neto referred to the reign of Dom Pedro II as the high point of capoeira: “During the Second Empire, capoeira reached its peak; that was truly the era in which it predominated and attained its fullest development.”¹³

The emergence of the mob is indeed related to urban growth in Rio de Janeiro during the latter part of the 19th century, much of which growth was driven by migration, primarily by the poorer freedmen as they flocked into the city.¹⁴ But the organization of the various mob outfits, in spite of all suppression efforts, is largely explainable by their usefulness in the rough-and-tumble of electoral politics. A remark by Melo Morais Filho on that point is especially telling: “(...) Supported on those swarthy shoulders, until just recently, were the House and Senate, into which many who govern us were guided by the light reflected off of a straight razor.”¹⁵

Judging by the reports from Lima Campos and Melo Morais Filho, the mob outfits in Rio de Janeiro had an inner discipline of sorts with their own power structure and a kind of “career ladder.” These outfits could form in terms of boroughs or neighborhoods (Glória, Lapa, Largo do Moura, Santa Luzia etc.) or guild-like, around occupations (Carpinteiros de São José, Conceição da Marinha).

At some point, according to Lima Campos, these various and sundry mob outfits merged to form two large families or “nations”: the “guaiamus” and “nagôs.” Politicians had an interest in preserving the mobs because of their usefulness for “electoral services”; hence the brazenness of the capoeiras – everywhere in evidence, for they enjoyed a certain immunity by connivance with the authorities. Each of the “nations” had ties to one or the other of the political parties under the monarchy; the Liberals or the Conservatives. The services to be had included breaking up rallies, stealing or switching ballot boxes, coercing electors and vengeful attacks on rival party politicians. Thus, within this context of fraudulent elections, mobsters – as service providers – were in a very real sense “professionals.” Admission into their ranks amounted, in the eyes of impoverished freedmen, to hopes for a livelihood, so that in a general way, recruiting efforts among the layabouts, vagrants and odd-job men tended to fill the ranks of these outfits with the necessary capoeira practitioners.

They were not, however, the only ones skilled in capoeira. Scions of good families became brawling toughs,

(13) Lima Campos, “A Capoeira”, article published in *Kosmos magazine*, Rio de Janeiro, 1906, apud Carlos Drummond de Andrade e Manuel Bandeira, *Rio de Janeiro em prosa e verso*, Livraria José Olympio Editora, Rio de Janeiro, 1965, pp. 191-194.

(14) On Rio de Janeiro’s urban growth in the mid-19th Century, see de Maurício de Abreu, *Evolução urbana do Rio de Janeiro*, IPLANRIO/ Zahar, Rio de Janeiro, 1988.

(15) See *Festas e tradições populares do Brasil*, Editora Itatiaia, Belo Horizonte, Edusp, São Paulo, 1979, pp. 257-263, apud Rego, op.cit., p. 280.

thanks to the knowledge they acquired fraternizing with the capoeiristas. Coelho Neto, admittedly fascinated by the capoeira arts, mentions “*eminent figures in politics, on faculties, and in the Army and Navy*” who supposedly learn the secrets of capoeira by somehow becoming associated with the mobs.¹⁶

The abetting of capoeira mobs by the authorities came to a head with the organization of the Black Guard, a secret society, the avowed purpose of which was to protect Princess Isabel. It actually managed to obtain police funding under the João Alfredo Ministry, and was thrown into

the balance as a paramilitary force to offset mobilizations by the expanding republican movement. Carried forward by an upsurge of sympathy in the wake of the abolition of slavery, the Black Guard inducted members into its ranks from among the capoeiristas – themselves highly organized and well-mobilized due to the structure of the mobs themselves – and also from among the usual assortment of delinquents and ne’er-do-well’s inhabiting the boundaries at which crime and civil order cross paths. The Black Guard – co-founded by José do Patrocínio– undertook to break up a number of Republican rallies and meetings in a last-ditch attempt to save the Monarchy. During the events leading up to the Proclamation of the Republic, reports alleging that the Black Guard had attacked the First Cavalry Regiment were pretext enough to get military insubordination under weigh.¹⁷

No coverage of capoeira during the Empire would be complete without special reference to a photograph taken by Christiano Júnior between 1864 and 1866, as a studio reproduction of a private capoeira lesson.¹⁸ In it, a black youth is instructing a swarthy boy in capoeira arts, teaching what appear to be the rudiments of the “ginga” steps. The picture suggests that even at that early date, the teaching of capoeira techniques involved training methods and master/apprentice arrangements. The hierarchical structure of the mob outfits could, if confirmed, make such conjecture more persuasive.

We should mention at this point that capoeira practitioners were viewed in several different lights at the time. Even as they terrorized the populace with their brawling and horseplay, they were admired for the way they stood up to the symbols of established order and power. To further this discussion, we reproduce here a fragment of a chronicle penned by Machado de Assis:

*(...) that I do not agree with my contemporaries, on the subject of the motives which lead the capoeiras to stick their knives in our bellies. They say it is for the delight of evil-doing, as a show of nimbleness and valor, a general opinion accepted as dogma. Nobody sees that it is simply absurd.*¹⁹

Coelho Neto wrapped capoeira in nostalgia and romanticism, and praised its high moral dignity for declining to use the straight razor (sic), for not kicking a man when he was down, and, when defending noble causes such as abolition,



Christiano Júnior

Private capoeira lesson
Photo: Christiano Júnior

(16) Coelho Neto cites Juca Paranhos, the future Barão do Rio Branco, Minister of Foreign Relations from 1902 to 1912, and a senior member of Brazil’s diplomatic corps, “*who, in youth, was quite the ‘charmer’ and in candid conversation let on that he was proud of it.*” apud Magalhães Júnior, op.cit., p. 185.
(17) See Rego, op.cit., p. 313-315; Magalhães Júnior, op.cit., vol. 1, pp. 326-327, 341-342, 373-376; Vol. 2, 63-64, 183, 228.
(18) See *Escravos Brasileiros do século XIX na fotografia de Christiano Jr.*, Paulo Cesar de Azevedo and Maurício Lissovsky (orgs.), Editora Ex Libris, São Paulo, 1987, Figure 71.
(19) Machado de Assis, *Crônicas* (1878-1888). W. M. Jackson Inc. Editores, 1938, Vol. IV, pp. 227-228, apud Rego, op.cit., pp.280-281.

Constant mention of capoeiras in police records during the Empire's waning decades led to specific provisions of criminal legislation singling them out for special treatment.

for doing so out of idealism and not in a mercenary spirit (sic). While exalting the bravery of the capoeiras, Coelho Neto retells the terror they inspired in the police force itself.²⁰

3. REPRESSION AND FORGOTTEN YEARS (CIRCA 1890-1930). Constant mention of capoeiras in police records during the Empire's waning decades led to specific provisions of criminal legislation singling them out for special treatment. The 1890 Criminal Code of the Republic of the United States of Brazil provided, in its Chapter XIII.

*Vagrants and Capoeiras / Article 402: Performing in the streets and public parks exercises of physical agility and dexterity known and referred to as capoeiragem; running about carrying weapons or instruments capable of producing physical wounds, causing tumult or disorder, making threats to persons known or unknown, or causing them to fear any harm: / Penalty: two to six months' confinement to a prison cell. / Stand-alone paragraph: Membership in a gang or mob is considered an aggravating circumstance. Kingpins or ringleaders are subject to twice the penalty (...)*²¹

Here before us, legally set in type, is the criminalization of capoeira – capoeira intimately linked to fringe elements, and qualified as both a bodily fighting technique and one involving the wielding of weapons such as straight razors, knives and clubs.

Even before the Criminal Code was legally enacted by decree, capoeira was the target of concerted official persecution. In the atmosphere of political instability permeating the early days of the Republic, Marechal Deodoro da Fonseca appointed as chief of police one Doctor Sampaio Ferraz, an experienced district attorney who, as a journalist, had stood in violent opposition to Monarchy. In making the appointment, the President gave him full power to rid the capital of all disorderly elements, beginning with the capoeira bands.

So began Sampaio Ferraz' formidable campaign against the capoeira mobs. To really rid the city of those outfits, the penalty applied was relocation. According to José Murilo de Carvalho, the practice began – as Imperial rule drew to a close – with the transporting of capoeiras to Mato Grosso. Sampaio Ferraz reportedly arrested and exiled to Fernando de Noronha – without benefit of trial – some 600 capoeiras. This same author observes that “there were many whites and even foreigners” among the capoeiras: Of 28 persons

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(20) See chronicle by Coelho Neto, “O nosso Jogo”, in Bazar, Livraria Chandron, de Lello e Irmãos Ltda., Porto, 1928, apud Magalhães Júnior, op.cit., pp. 136-138.

(21) *Código Penal Brasileiro*, by Doutor Manuel Clementino de Oliveira Escorel, Tipografia by Cia. Ind. de São Paulo, 1893, apud Luiz Renato Vieira, *Da vadição à capoeira regional*, Masters thesis for the Department of Sociology at UnB, 1991.

arrested in April of 1890 and charged with practicing capoeira, five were black, and seven of the 10 whites were foreigners. "One commonly found Portuguese and Italian nationals among those arrested for *capoeiragem*. And the whites involved were not always poor."²²

Indeed, in that very month of April of 1890 the Ministry was brought to the brink of crisis because of the arrest of a famous capoeira and brigand named Juca Reis, a young man born of a wealthy Portuguese family that owned the newspaper *O Paiz*, managed by Quintino Bocayuva – who at the time was Minister of Foreign Relations. Faced with the prospect of a prison sentence and deportation of the bourgeois "brawler," Bocayuva threatened to hand in his resignation in an ultimatum that called for freeing his former employer's son – which meant dismissing Sampaio Ferraz – or he would resign from office. A compromise solution was finally reached whereby high society's capoeira would be allowed to embark voluntarily for a foreign country upon his arrival at Fernando de Noronha.

The episode shows how deeply capoeira had permeated all levels of society. Capoeira practice actually made it possible for different social classes to fraternize. Carvalho argues that the blending of classes observed in capoeira was a long-standing tradition in religious orders and benev-

olent societies. The occasions amounted to "self-recognition" by the populace of Rio de Janeiro, living as they did at the transition point between a typical slaveholding colonial town and a modern capitalist metropolis. Numerous examples can be cited of events betokening the creation of spaces open to confraternization, such as the Penha festivities, sightings of known politicians at *candomblé* centers, the gradual social elevation of samba and the spread of soccer playing among the poorer classes. Citizenship was wanting at the political level, however, and led to cynicism and indifference which, in turn, gave rise to the *carnivalization* (or the subversion of the hierarchy) of power and social relations.²³

These reflections shed a little light on the sluggishness with which capoeira was accepted by society. Its suppression, as undertaken by Sampaio Ferraz, could be regarded as a success inasmuch as it resulted in the virtual disappearance of capoeira. According to one French traveler who spent several months in Rio in 1883, compilations by the police place the number of capoeiristas in that city at approximately 20,000. Some 20 years later, in his preface

(22) See José Murilo de Carvalho, *Os bestializados/ O Rio de Janeiro e a República que não foi*, Cia. das Letras, São Paulo, 1987, p. 179, f. 25 and p. 155.

(23) Carvalho, *op.cit.*, pp. 156-160.



Jogo de Capoeira.
J.M. Rugendas, 1802-1858

Beginning in the 1930s, there was a slow process whereby capoeira gradually shed its connections with illegality and the world of crime. Such process resulted into social acceptance and elevation for capoeira.

to *Japanese Physical Education*, the author, Captain Santos Porto, asserted: "Among us, long ago, those agile practices known as capoeiragem cropped up even among the children of the most distinguished families." Lima Campos in 1906 again bemoaned the passing of a perceived authentic spirit of capoeira, stating that the capoeiristas of that day "don't make [the practice] into a real art, a profession, an institution. (...) plainly put, they are rather more like anarchists, razor and knife fighters, indeed, loudmouthed malcontents, rather than true, dedicated, professional and disciplined capoeiras."²⁴ Carvalho reports on a story told by the Chief of Police in 1904 about rounding up vagrants in the wake of the Vaccination Revolt²⁵: of the more than 2000 arrested, only 73 were arrested for practicing capoeira. After all the commotion and uproar raised by the mob, there followed a deafening silence on the subject of capoeira. Nevertheless, further research is still needed to give proper grounds for claiming that capoeira practically disappeared during the last decade of the 19th century.

Persecution and suppression in Bahia persisted into the 1920s, with the famous incursions by police Chief Pedro de Azevedo Gordilho, nicknamed Pedrito, against *candomblé* parishioners and capoeiristas. Bear in mind that society in Salvador was much more radically stratified by the binary master/slave (or white/black) dichotomy than was the case in Rio de Janeiro.²⁶ In any event, deeper studies must be conducted to determine the extent of the diffusion of capoeira through society throughout the 19th century in Bahia. So far, no mobs have been identified as present in Bahia in the 19th century. Rego mentions the capoeira-strong-arm-man in the pay of the potentates, by which he probably meant members of mob outfits in Rio. Wetherell, Great Britain's vice-consul in Bahia from 1842 to 1857, describes a typical fight in the Salvador's waterfront Lower City in which "(...) [the blacks] are movement personified, leaping and moving their arms and legs non-stop, like monkeys when they fight (...)"²⁷

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4. "SCHOLASTICIZATION," SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE AND A NEW PROFESSIONALISM (CIRCA 1930-).

Beginning in the 1930s, there was a slow process whereby capoeira gradually shed its connections with illegality and the world of crime. Such process resulted into social acceptance and elevation for capoeira. During the course of this third metamorphosis, capoeira was demonstrated at official receptions, recognized as an authentic manifestation of Brazil's popular culture and, above all, offered as

(24) See Santos Porto, preface to his *Educação física japonesa*. Cia. Topográfica Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 1905; Lima Campos, apud Drummond and Bandeira. *op.cit.*, p.193.

(25) Editor's Note: *Revolta da Vacina* (Vaccination Revolt) was a popular rebellion against the federal government's decree of compulsory vaccination of the population of Rio de Janeiro. The vaccination ignited the issue of people's grievance at a series of impositions by the federal government.

(26) See Rego, *op.cit.*, p. 315.

(27) See James Wetherell, *Brasil: apontamentos sobre a Bahia 1842-1857*, Ed. do Banco da Bahia. The translator identifies capoeira in this description.

course material in specialized schools or “academies.”

A necessary backdrop for the development of “academic” capoeira with a teaching methodology of its own was a political and ideological nexus in which the nation’s identity and the building up of a national culture stood in the limelight of intellectual debate. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, intellectuals committed to diverse aesthetic and political movements were preoccupied with bringing about an ideal “Brazilian-ness,” a reflection of “genuinely” national cultural values. Central to this debate was the quest for a middle ground between the need to modernize and, at the same time, keep traditions intact. The conditions that made a resurgence of capoeira possible were molded from the very core of the political and social transformations associated with the ongoing process of industrialization.

The Revolution of 1930²⁸ heralded the establishment of new relations between social classes and the political State. Populist in its methods and argot, the newly-entrenched power elite sought to legitimize the State’s stewardship of society and hammered out a “statist ideology,” on the blueprint for which a number of modernist intellectuals were put to work generating patriotic symbolism. The Armed Forces, steeped in the belief that their mission was the “purification” of politics, set their eyes upon education as an essential instrument of social mobilization for the (re)construction of national feeling. Through it, they tried to fuse together mass education and military principles of organizational structure and discipline. To accomplish this, the State – now the agent and promoter of culture itself – appropriated manifestations of popular culture as its own. A portentous sign of the times was the inclusion of capoeira in the new Special Police training curriculum in 1932, which simultaneously served two pragmatic purposes: as a fighting technique, necessary to the training of police professionals, and as a nation-affirming cultural value.²⁹

Within this context there emerged a new form of capoeira, inculcating the notion of efficacy. It boasted, as its first symbolic milestone, the creation, by *Mestre* Bimba in 1932, of the pioneer Academy, named the *Physical Culture and Capoeira regional Center of Bahia*. We must understand that before then – considerations raised by the photography of Christiano Júnior notwithstanding – capoeira was something learned and taught on the streets. Circles were organized in public places and the training in techniques disparaged the notion of more formal preparation. In other words, one learned by doing – and not by training, as is done today. When he made martial efficacy the touchstone and cornerstone for his new “style,” Bimba was, in effect, admitting that he considered capoeira, as it existed at the time, a weak contender from a martial arts standpoint. Taking that as a point of departure, he developed a teaching method which, by placing all emphasis on preparing the capoeirista as a fighter, tended to deemphasize the entertainment component of the art. A process of “scholasticizing” was thereby placed in motion, at the expense

of its trappings as a “pastime” and marked by the gradual disappearance of capoeira circles from the streets.

In addition to upgrading capoeira in its martial aspects, with refinements of technique and even the addition of moves developed by other fighting styles, Bimba also sought to free it of the stigma of the underworld. Vieira made the observation that to qualify for admission in the Regional Academy, the “student” (whence, the “scholasticization”) had to be enrolled in school or gainfully employed, so that idlers (or the unemployed?) were denied admission. To this screening Bimba added cultural formalities assimilated from polite society, and therefore alien to the popular milieu: entrance exams, basic training, graduation ceremonies and specialized training curricula. Down these avenues, Bimba struggled to legitimize his capoeira style as an educational pursuit, even as he included military principles of organizational structure and discipline.

Bimba and his students participated in the official Second of July parade in 1936, and his school was officially chartered in 1937 (a *de facto* decriminalization of capoeira). He taught classes at the Army Reserve Officers School in Salvador from 1939 to 1942, and put on a demonstration for President Getúlio Vargas in 1953. These are milestone events which signally proclaim the social regeneration and general acceptance of capoeira. As witness, *mestre* Bimba did establish contact with groups of university students interested in learning capoeira. Furthermore, many of his students were from upper-crust families in Salvador. We may surmise from all of this that claims to the effect that capoeira regional was tailored to the requirements of the more privileged social strata are not entirely without merit.³⁰

One consequence of the emergence of the so-called “capoeira regional” was a spurious distinction between two “styles”: “Angola,” understood to be the older and more traditional, and “regional,” viewed by purists as an ersatz version. In point of fact, the whole idea of “capoeira Angola” arose in response to the advent of Bimba’s regional style, and emerged in 1941 when *Mestre* Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira) organized his Capoeira Angola Sports Center in Bahia. Confusion often arises between the *berimbau* “tone” known as the “toque de Angola” (that is, a playing rhythm that goes with a certain style of practice) and a so-called “Angola style” of capoeira. It must be understood at the outset that there are different tones and rhythms that call for different forms of capoeira, and that their variety of possible rhythms does not necessarily imply a crystallization into different “styles” or “schools” of capoeira.

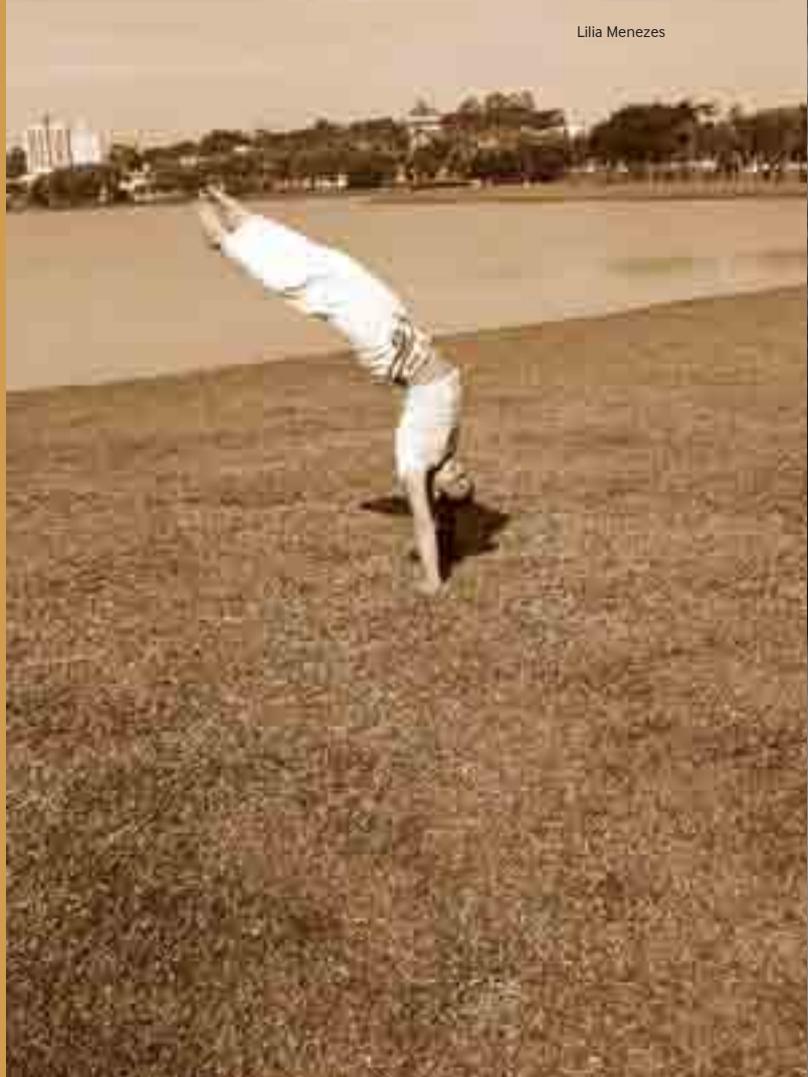
One effect of the emergence of capoeira academies was the severing, once and for all, of the ties associating

(28) Editor’s Note: The Revolution of 1930, aimed at moralizing political institutions, was organized by regional social elites against the hegemony of traditional coffee oligarchies. As a result, Getúlio Vargas rose to power and a new regime known as *Estado Novo* (1937-1945) was installed.

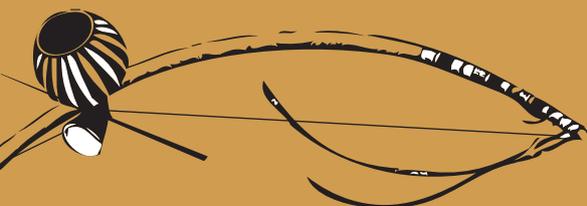
(29) See Vieira, *op.cit.*, Chapter II.

(30) See Vieira, *op.cit.*, p. 175.

The Black Arts Festival held in Dakar, Senegal in 1966 played host to *MESTRE* Pastinha and his group, and may have been the first official demonstration of capoeira outside of Brazil. Ever since the 1970s, and even more so since the 1980s, an ever-increasing number of capoeiristas has traveled to Europe or the US, offering courses and even settling down to protracted work overseas.



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capoeira practice with the underworld. The stigma that this was an activity for “idlers” or “underworld characters” gradually faded away, to be replaced by the context surrounding the world of capoeira today. Furthermore, the rapid spread of the art, now driven by the academies, was attended by an unchecked proliferation of “*mestres*” and the resulting cheapening or distortion of the original meaning of the title. In any case, capoeira became a means of livelihood, and with the academies, professional standing for *mestres* (or teachers/instructors) acquired substance.

Mixed results also followed from the perpetuation of teaching techniques over the years. Systematic training methods, based on repetitive practice of movements, coupled with the continuous interchange among the various groups in Brazil and overseas did, in fact, make for unimaginable athletic feats and technical development. The emphasis on repetition, however, gave the movements a sort of “mechanical” or “rote” aspect, standardizing the forms of play and forcing personal styles into a Procrustean mold.

Another interesting sidelight of today’s capoeira has to do with its spread across the globe. The Black Arts Festival held in Dakar, Senegal in 1966 played host to *Mestre* Pastinha and his group, and may have been the first official demonstration of capoeira outside of Brazil. Ever since the 1970s, and even



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more so since the 1980s, an ever-increasing number of capoeiristas has traveled to Europe or the US, offering courses and even settling down to protracted work overseas.³¹

In a nutshell, capoeira evolved through different forms over time, and outlasted bigotry and persecution. As a globalized world embarks on the 21st century, the very suggestion that, about a century ago, in the classical Gilded Age of imperialism, its very existence had been endangered, seems odd and out of place. Capoeira today is flourishing all over the world. Still, its tradition and specific features merit consideration such that special attention ought to be given to the preservation of the many traditional *berimbau* airs and tones, tones which, when all is said and done, are the strongest link to the tradition as it stood once the days of the outfits and underworld mobs had become a thing of the past.

Guilherme Frazão Conduru. Career diplomat and capoeirista, a student in Rio de Janeiro under *Mestres* Sorriso and Garrincha, both of the Grupo Senzala, itself founded in Rio in 1966.

(31) A case in point is that of Mestre Acordeon, *baiano*, follower of Mestre Bimba, who established his school in San Francisco, California, from whence he brought a large group of American students in 1983, to introduce them to capoeira in Brazil. Similar cases emerged, in steadily-growing numbers.

