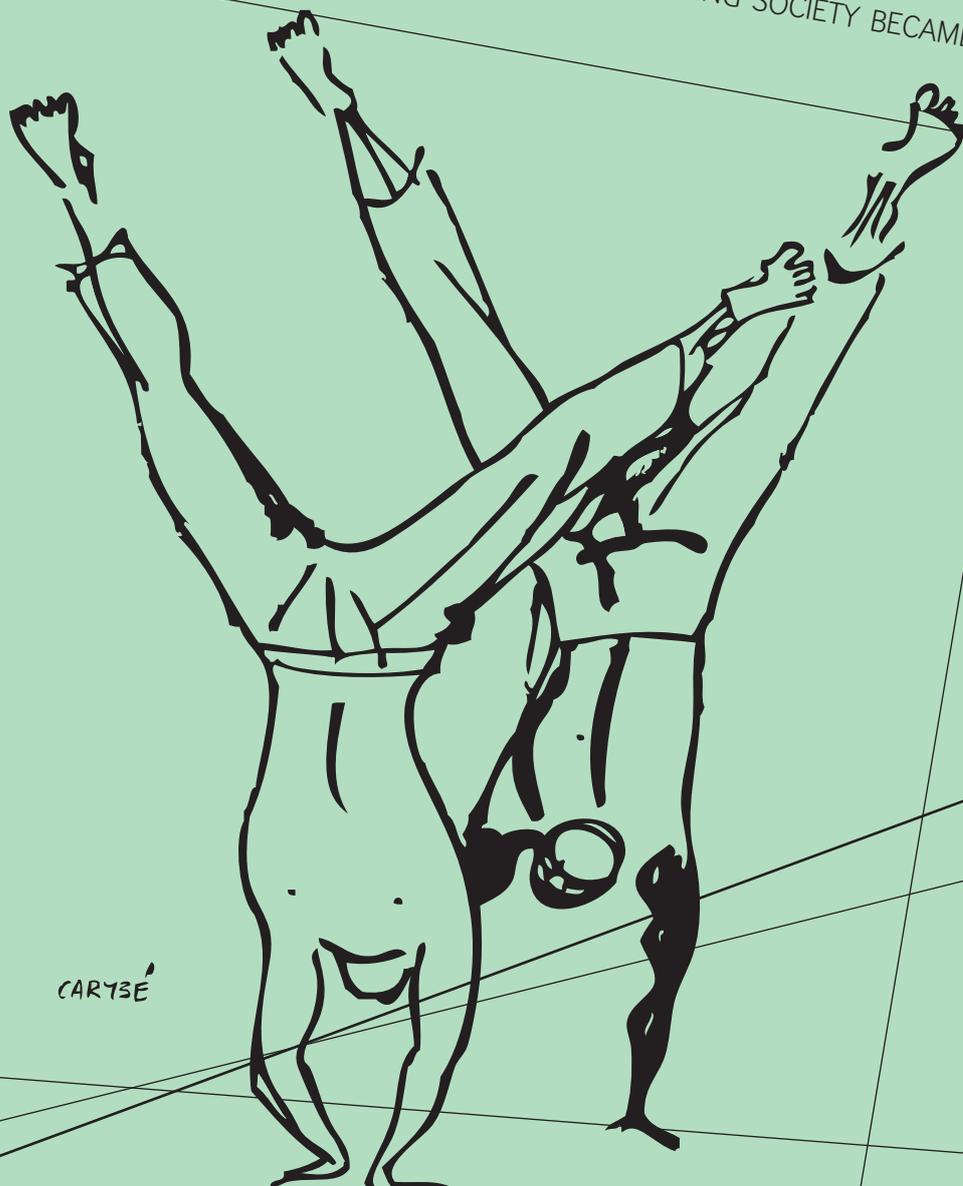


THE WAR ON CAPOEIRA

FREDERICO JOSÉ DE ABREU

ONE HAS NO WAY OF KNOWING PRECISELY WHEN THE SUPPRESSION OF CAPOEIRA FIRST CAME ABOUT. HERE I APPROACH THE SUBJECT FROM THE DAWN OF THE 19TH CENTURY, WHEN CONTROLS ON NEGRO FESTIVITIES WERE TIGHTENED AS BRAZIL'S SLAVEHOLDING SOCIETY BECAME INCREASINGLY VIGILANT.



This may have been due in part to the domestic traffic in slaves between provinces, and to migration inside national borders. Within these cities, capoeira – a part of everyday life, everywhere evident in the workplace, wherever the police were summoned by civil unrest, and at Negro festivities – was associated with the ways and customs of the darker population.

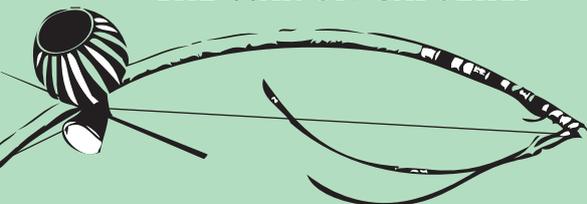
Batuque was a generic term applied indiscriminately to Negro gatherings which almost invariably blended percussion instruments and dancing. Singing was also a feature of get-togethers, both sacred and profane, which could be held separately and apart from each other, or jointly. Hence, samba, *candomblé*, capoeira and other predominantly black dances and festivities, though distinct from one another, were all lumped together under the common term *batuque*.

Much of what we possess by way of historical observations of Brazil in the 1800s is due to the testimony and impressions set down by foreign visitors. These visitors produced essential documents making it possible to identify features and aspects of the black population's customs and lifestyle, be they slaves, born free or freedmen, whether African by birth or native sons born in Brazil. It was common among foreigners to make comparisons between Brazil and Africa, especially as they looked out on cities such as Salvador, Recife and Rio de Janeiro. All three busy urban seaports, centers for the traffic in slaves until its abolition in 1871, lay within the colonial provinces of Bahia, Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro. All three cities were predominantly black, and the black population, indispensable to the workings of everyday urban life, thronged their busy streets and boulevards. Small wonder, then, that these cities were especially conducive to the drumbeat of Negro festivities.

Salvador, Recife and Rio de Janeiro – so far as historical research has been able to discern – were the primary centers for the development and spread of capoeira to other parts of Brazil from the 19th century through the middle of the 20th century. This may have been due in part to the domestic traffic in slaves between provinces, and to migration inside national borders. Within these cities, capoeira – a part of everyday life, everywhere evident in the workplace, wherever the police were summoned by civil unrest, and at Negro festivities – was associated with the ways and customs of the darker population. Word of all this, set forth in the tales told by foreigners, is corroborated from other sources such as oral tradition, newspapers of the time, police blotters and court records. A perusal of these reports shows us that this repression was one of the most serious threats ever faced by capoeira throughout its existence.

Early 19th century Brazil was a hotbed of sociopolitical conflict and insurgency, added to the struggle for independence, all of which culminated, in 1822, in the loosening of Portugal's grip on the nation. Those events were interspersed with such popular revolts as the anti-conscription *Sabinada* (1831-1833) in the province of Bahia, the grassroots *Cabanagem* uprising (1835-1840), in the province of Grão-Pará, and the overlapping *Balaçada* revolt (1838-1841) in the province of Maranhão. The earlier Tailors' Conspiracy, brought to a head by a 1798 rebel movement in Salvador in which the yearning for freedom of the downtrodden slaves swept them into the affray in hopes of bringing about the abolition of slavery. Aggravating this picture of political instability were numerous uprisings

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Batuque
J.M Rugendas (1802-1858)



and slave revolts in the early part of the 19th century. Many of these were in rural areas, but some broke out in the cities, especially Salvador, between 1807 and 1835. This succession of events in such a brief span, centered as they were about the city of Salvador, suggested that the province of Bahia was teeming with incipient slave revolts.

Naturally enough, this generalized apprehension over slave conspiracies put the authorities and population of Salvador – a city divided at every level along racial lines and keenly alive to the ever-present animosity – in a state of alarm. Part of the reaction to the slave revolts was an effort to identify their causes, and Negro festivities were numbered among them. It would be no simple matter to establish a ban on those festivities and make it stick; a realization brought home everywhere by the sound of illegal conga drums and marimba music. Those instruments had been banned by city ordinances passed as far back as 1716 in efforts to discipline, by force of law, the black population in the city streets. Conga drums and marimbas were the percussion instruments providing the sounds and atmosphere for the gatherings. The slaveholding society – dependent on slaves for its own survival – was facing a moment of truth: how could such a

society keep the slaves from holding gatherings indispensable to their very way of life, yet which aroused in that society so much distress and apprehension?

Just what sort of distress and apprehension they were experiencing is easily made out through the complaints in the newspapers of the time: “huge crowds of Negroes, male and female, of the many African nations were chatting, dancing and singing their native songs to the sound of many horrible conga drums”; “noisy entertainment”; “grating sounds and voices”; “barbaric customs”; “heady and intoxicating convulsions”; “fighting”; “indecent and immoral displays”; or “awful dances...”. These complaints did not stop at disparaging manifestations of black culture as uncivilized. They also pointed to social disorder: to the extent that these drumbeat parties were held “whenever and wherever the slaves wanted them,” it meant that blacks held control – albeit tenuous and fleeting – over those places during the course of the festivities. Already established by custom when permitted, upbeat gatherings of blacks also hovered on the outskirts of street festivals held on Catholic holy days. On those occasions, according to the complainants, “the singing and drumming of the Negroes drowned out all other sounds.”

Despite all, these festivities had their defenders among the elite. Some clergymen understood them to be “honest and innocent fun and games,” and held that the slaves were also God’s children and were therefore entitled to relaxation and enjoyment.

Through the meanderings of these complaints one could divine the deep-seated importance of these drumbeat festivals to the lives of those slaves, and the sense of pride they derived from them. This was something foreign visitors observed and recorded. As chroniclers, they were fascinated by the eagerness and excitement with which the slaves threw themselves into the festivities after a grueling day at forced labor. It was hard to believe these were slaves they were watching. The eagerness of the slaves toward these joyous festivities, as chronicled in the reports, suggest that they may have been valuable aids in regenerating bodies worn out by the strenuous effort required of slave labor. One of these awestruck traveling chroniclers, Rugendas, reported that “we can hardly believe these are slaves we have before us.” From this we may surmise that these slave festivities (capoeira, samba, *candomblé* and other festive gatherings) provided occasions for slaves to restore a part of their humanity crushed under the brutal heel of slavery.

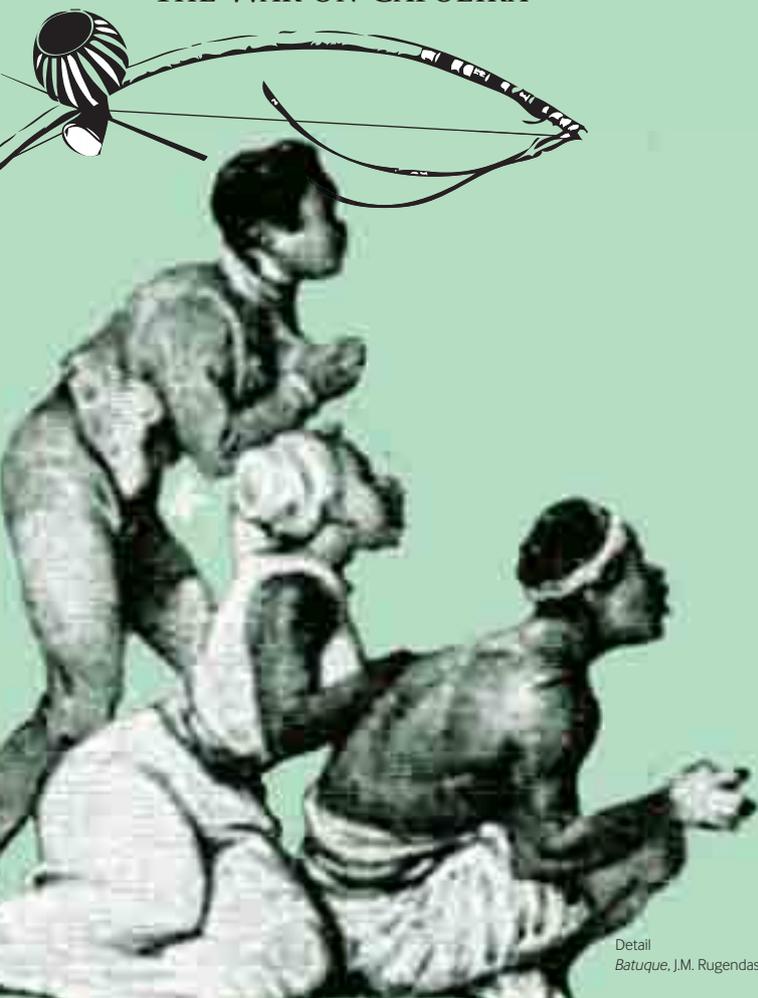
Despite all, these festivities had their defenders among the elite. Some clergymen understood them to be “honest and innocent fun and games,” and held that the slaves were also God’s children and were therefore entitled to relaxation and enjoyment. Several slaveowners regarded these festivities as an opportunity for the slaves to forget, at least momentarily, their wretched lives, by drowning their sorrows in mirth.

Yet the moment of truth was at hand, with all of society trapped between the horns of a dilemma – a serious dilemma – given its historical context. Prompted by daily fears of slave revolts, the dominant slaveholding system sought to curb all activities which made it easy for black people to congregate anywhere beyond the control and watchful supervision of the slavemasters and the police. The activities in question included the drumbeat festivals, for they invariably congregated multitudes and were therefore most balefully viewed by the authorities as breeding grounds for conspiracies and abettors of the many slave revolts taking place in Bahia at the time.

Opinions about these festivities poured forth from government authorities, the clergy, policemen, slaveowners, politicians and ordinary people. Anybody could ponder, opine or try to influence a decision as to whether these gatherings ought to be allowed or suppressed. Deciding either way, given the gravity of the situation outlined in the numerous complaints, and the association between those festivities and the now-familiar slave risings, was the government’s prerogative. Indeed, since 1767, with the creation of the *Calabouço* – a public place for punishment of slaves – slaveowners had no more inducement to punish their slaves privately, so that control of blacks on the streets was taken away from their owners, and became a public utility provided by the State and administered through its police.

City Hall, responsible for municipal ordinances (laws regulating and disciplining the people and their trade on city streets), was helpless to interfere with the drumbeat fes-

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Detail
Batuque, J.M. Rugendas



Blacks fighting
Augustus Earle (1793-1838)

tivities or to block those who took the initiative to organize them. In point of fact, the means of enforcement at the time were such that the authorities no longer controlled the situation. To prohibit those gatherings or round up the participants (*batuqueiros*) was to strike at the branches and not the root cause. Some new policy for repression was needed to quiet the fears of the populace, guide the police in their actions and put teeth into prohibition by city ordinance.

The first one to take the dilemma in hand was the Conde da Ponte, who served as governor of Bahia from 1804 to 1808. The Count's policy was to declare all-out war on the batuque festivities, to be enforced as violently as necessary by the police, in a radical effort to do away entirely with those assemblies. The issue, as he saw it, could only be settled one way: subjugate the participants in these assemblies and close off all avenues for conspiracies among slaves. It was a brave but empty gesture, for the festivities continued unabated, and just as unrelenting were the disgruntled complaints of persons importuned by the racket. Slave uprisings continued apace throughout the Conde da Ponte's term as Governor of Bahia.

Bahia's next governor, from 1808 to 1818, was the Conde dos Arcos, whose platform, more conciliatory than that of his predecessor, called for more moderate police repression. His policy toward the festivities alternated back and forth between permissive and repressive as he sought to reconcile

the opposing interests of the stakeholders. Suppression was ordered in the wake of complaints from the more influential members of society, and permission granted in deference to recommendations by the Reverend clergy and certain slave owners. The practical expression of this reconciliation in the form of substantive policy initiatives amounted to regulation by the governor over those black gatherings, determining the times and places they could be held. Gone were the grounds for old complaints alleging they could occur at any time or place, while at the same time the slaves were ensured the entertainment and festivities which all human beings require, as requested by their masters and clergy, with everything done in a controlled manner.

The Count tried his best to defuse the worries that the drumbeat festivals would encourage slave revolts. He pointed to these gatherings as more likely to give rise to misunderstandings among the slaves themselves, on account of ethnic differences traceable back to Africa, and ordinary squabbles sparked by the tribulations they faced as Negroes in slaveholding Brazil. When measured by its effects, the policies of Governor Conde dos Arcos were identical to those of Governor Conde da Ponte: the throbbing rhythms of drumbeat parties rang out unabated, to the discomfiture of Bahia's slavocracy. The functioning, indeed, the very existence of that slavocracy was entirely dependent on the exploitation of slave labor, and the gath-

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erings were indispensable to those slaves. The festivities went on, uncontrolled and inevitable, as did the disgruntled complaints against them. Neither the complaints published in the newspapers nor the prohibitions passed by the municipal authorities – whatever the damage done by police in enforcement efforts – could divert the course of history from the path down which it flowed with the incredible momentum of that which simply had to be, if we may paraphrase Brazilian composer and singer Caetano Veloso.

Returning now to that list of complaints, the oft-expressed opinion that the gatherings were barbaric was a widely held and popular prejudice among the ruling elites throughout the entire 19th century and well into the 20th; a prejudice which, to this day, has not yet died out. To these elites, capoeira, samba and *candomblé* were blemishes on the face of the civilization they sought to construct, for they did not fit in at all with the customs and public procedures of the countries they deemed most civilized (those of Europe). Many arguments were formulated on behalf of these prejudices, some to keep those gatherings out of the nicer neighborhoods, and others to ban them entirely. Yet they were pipe dreams, couched in empty rhetoric propped up by progressive ideals, for the model civilization the elite were after refused to materialize, blocked at every turn by deep-seated social and economic facts. In true fact, it might be said that economic development, modernization and urban transformation in the major cities of Brazil were in line with anachronistic practices of labor organization: in the nineteenth century human slavery was considered barbaric by foreign visitors, a fact that would revert any expectations for presenting the country in the light of an European model.

In our overview of the war on *batuque* festivities so far, we have pointed out much of what guided the efforts to suppress those Negro assemblies. Yet it must be said that each of those particular assemblies had to deal with its own specific context, and the efforts at resistance put up by participants in every one of them were no less particular. Because of this, despite the large number of elements common to all of them, each has its own story to tell, as is very much the case for capoeira. Word of that particular feature being observed in Brazil dates back to before the 19th century. Since that time there has also been word of efforts at suppression directed against capoeiristas. This development is so deeply embedded in the earliest origins of capoeira that the history of those days must be researched, studied and told using as primary sources the chronicles and police records of the time.

Care must be taken in analyzing these sources to eliminate police jargon, prejudices contained in the narration, and vitiated approaches, all of which could contaminate the historical view of the capoeiras of yesteryear. With these precautions and through these documents we may gain some insights into these capoeiras' longings, rites, social behavior and habits, how they addressed each other, their

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Detail
Batuque, J.M. Rugendas

argot, the urban geography they inhabited, the weapons they used, biographical data, information on their skin color, ethnic background, dress, occupations, professions, ritual conflicts between them and the police, and their tactics, at opportune moments, for expressing their art.

The war on capoeira went through several stages, beginning with simple prohibition, followed by whippings under the knout, until it came to be regarded as a problem for the government by the Republicans in power. That administration made capoeira a crime under the Criminal Code of the Republic in 1890. There were numerous conflicts between capoeiristas and the police before things came to such a pass. These conflicts were serious enough to warrant referring to that period (from the second half of the 19th century through the first decades of the 20th) as marked by civil unrest – unrest occurring mainly in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Salvador, for the reasons already covered.

Capoeira traditions in those cities were similar, not only in form and content, but also in the social behavior of the practitioners themselves. Capoeiristas in those cities were generally street workers (porters, haulers, traveling salesmen, market vendors and janitors) or worked at the docks (stevedores, warehouse help and oarsmen). One should note that among the occupations engaged in by these capoeiras were trades frequently associated with idlers and tramps, such as fisherman, messenger boy, odd-job man, and the like. We also know something of their predilection for open festivities. Oddly enough, even to many folks apprehensive about the presence of capoeiristas at street festivals, their participation – along with that of the samba troupes – was considered essential to liven up the more pagan aspects of the partying in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. It hardly mattered that they were blamed for any fights that broke out at these gatherings.

Common to all three cities was the prosecution of repression, albeit varying in degree from one place to another, with the strictest suppression occurring in Rio de Janeiro. This repression came about through prohibition of the practice of capoeira in city ordinances, marked by persecution and arrests, oftentimes arbitrary, by physical abuse and corporal punishment, forced labor and relocation or exile. Conscription into the Army and Navy was another instrument of repression, one that harked back to colonial days when there were not enough professionally-trained troops in Brazil, so that press gangs prowled the streets for levies, focusing primarily on those regarded as hepcats, idlers and criminals. The Army and Navy also did extra service in those days as reform schools for juveniles – runaway slaves among them – who, under assumed names, were admitted into the armed forces. Especially noteworthy was a campaign which the government had on foot at the time to build up volunteer forces (*Voluntários da Pátria*), and among their numbers were many capoeiristas who fought for Brazil during the war with Paraguay (1864-1870).

The policy of suppressing capoeira, and its methods of enforcement were in every case supported, it must be said,

by stereotypes circulated by the police and that depicted capoeira practitioners as rowdies, brawlers, idlers and underworld figures. The generalization was hardly valid for all capoeiristas, and the tarbrush passed over the non-Negro practitioners, some of whom were aristocrats, policemen, society figures, students, etc. Also included among them were young people rebelling against authority at school or in the home. They preferred the freedom of the streets, and went in for capoeira as a form of entertainment as well as a means of self-affirmation in their chosen environment.

It was among that very elite of capoeira practitioners that the idea took shape that capoeira was both a healthy form of exercise and an effective fighting style, and that the perniciousness attributed to it actually traced its origins to its marginalized practitioners (blacks, Bohemians, vagrants, the lower classes, etc.).

Capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Salvador reacted to government suppression by resorting to resistance measures, relying on decoy tactics and dissimulation to evade the police. They tended to practice in out-of-the-way places or in the city's main boroughs, when and where the police patrols were spread thinner. These strategies were honed by the earlier capoeiras in Bahia, whose arsenal of resistance tactics included negotiating with the police for permission to idle (in other words, practice capoeira). There was certainly no shortage of conflicts between capoeiristas and the police during the course of all this resistance, and the battle sometimes went to the former, who better knew their way around and possessed superior skills in personal combat. Tales of that repression also caught the imagination, with stories and legends clothing the capoeiristas with supernatural powers, as men able to turn themselves into logs, plants or animals if pursued.

The desperate straits of capoeira, as told by historical records, were deeper and more prevalent in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Capoeira practitioners had a greater influence on day-to-day life in that city than anywhere else during the 19th century. That much is clear from newspaper reports of the time, with their blow-by-blow coverage of conflicts among rival capoeira outfits (competing underworld groups) and between these outfits and the police. By means of these battles they carved out their own territories within the city, where they set themselves up as parallel governments. These newspaper reports included shrill denunciations of the widespread influence of capoeira mobsters in city life, and in politics, with serious involvement in events such as the Abolition of Slavery (1888), and the Proclamation of the Republic (1889). Participation by capoeira mobs in larger society in Rio de Janeiro provided much of the justification for adding a ban on capoeira as part of the Criminal Code of the early Republic.

To the criminalization of capoeira by law were added other police measures given substance by the apprehension of the main capoeiristas in Rio and their forcible relocation to the island of Fernando de Noronha, which at the

One name stands out as a beacon in this historic comeback of capoeira, that of Mestre Bimba, the pioneer who took up the style and made it his life's work. He managed to secure, through official channels, the right to teach the form. This was the forerunner of all the lessons that would enable capoeira to make its historic turnaround, so that today it is looked upon as a way of healing social ills – ills of which, in former times, it was held to have been the cause.

time served as a penal colony. It was largely due to these forms of suppression that the capoeira tradition in Rio de Janeiro became uncoordinated and practically disappeared. A few practitioners who escaped the repression were able to blend in with *bon-vivant* hepcats of samba and Carnival ways. In Pernambuco, for reasons which have eluded proper study, capoeira withered away during that same period and saved itself from extinction by setting a pattern for the vigorous steps of the *frevo*, a dance deeply rooted in the culture of that state.

During all of this, the capoeira tradition in Bahia gained strength. It had, true enough, gone through episodes of repression over the course of the 19th-century, and the works of some of its adepts were held up as a repeat of things done in Rio de Janeiro. Historically speaking, however, the capoeiras in Bahia made a surprise move by working directly for the preservation and continued existence of capoeira as a form of enjoyment, artistic practice, as leisure and entertainment (harmless fun and games) without, however, doing away with its potential as self-defense. They were thus able to establish friendly relations and put the thing in a favorable light socially, which purpose they achieved by joining in calendar feasts and celebrations in Bahia, where capoeira exhibitions were put on as a form of entertainment to delight the *baiano* public.

The credit for all of this work goes to a generation of *mestres* that, though practically shrouded in anonymity, shouldered the task, beginning in the 1930s, of becoming masters of the civilizing arts. They went on to change the ways and manners of capoeiristas, by refining their styles and accentuating the positive social aspects of the form. To these features, inherent in the art from the outset, and which endured through trying times, were added social and educational value, so that capoeira was placed on its feet as a proud symbol of national identity. With that much accomplished, the necessary groundwork to show that the ban on capoeira had no place in the Criminal Code was completed. One name stands out as a beacon in this historic comeback of capoeira, that of Mestre Bimba, the pioneer who took up the style and made it his life's work. He managed to secure, through official channels, the right to teach the form. This was the forerunner of all the lessons that would enable capoeira to make its historic turnaround, so that today it is looked upon as a way of healing social ills – ills of which, in former times, it was held to have been the cause.

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Detail
Batuque, J.M. Rugendas

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