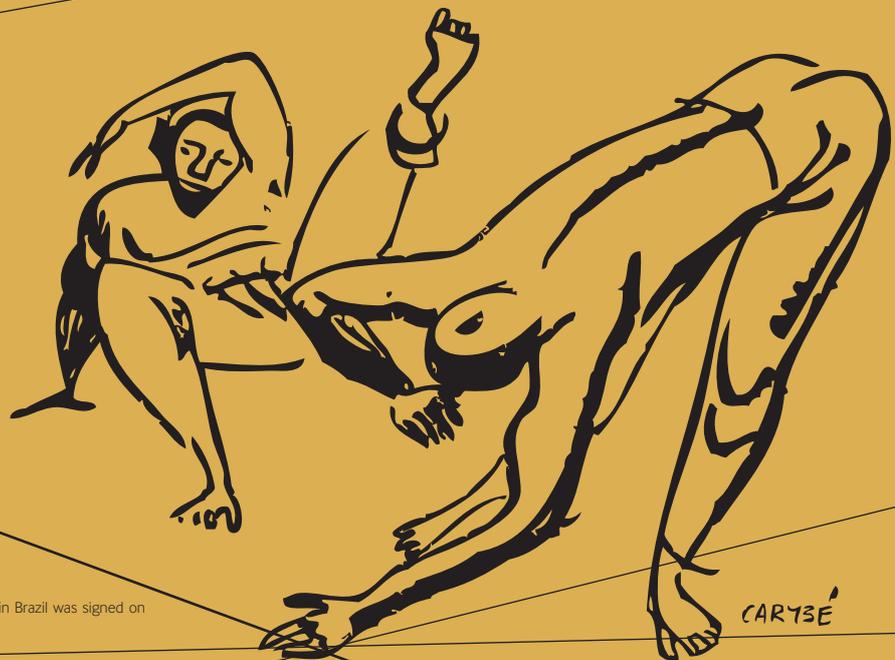


THE BLACK GUARD: CAPOEIRA IN THE ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE OF POLITICS

CARLOS EUGÊNIO LÍBANO SOARES

OF ALL THE PHENOMENA ATTENDING THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN BRAZIL AT THE CLOSE OF THE 19TH CENTURY, ONE OF THE MOST COMMENTED ON – AND LEAST EXAMINED – HAS BEEN THE SO-CALLED BLACK GUARD. THE EPISODE SURVIVES IN THE MIND'S EYE AS THE STORY OF A GROUP OF FORMER SLAVES WHO – GRATEFUL FOR THE IMPERIAL DECREE SIGNED BY PRINCESS ISABEL AS ACTING REGENT, THAT ENDED SLAVERY IN BRAZIL – SQUARED OFF AGAINST THE ENEMIES OF THE THRONE, WHOM THEY ACCUSED OF PLOTTING TO OVERTHROW THE MONARCHY IN REACTION TO THE GOLDEN LAW FREEING THE SLAVES¹.



(1) The Golden Law (Lei Áurea) abolishing slavery in Brazil was signed on May 13, 1888.

Gone was the brief phenomenon shoehorned into the 18-month interval between May 13, 1888 and November 15, 1889, to be replaced by the realization that the Guard had much deeper roots in another familiar aspect of Brazilian culture – an aspect the details of which have only recently begun to emerge from the shadows of the past: capoeira.

THE BLACK GUARD: CAPOEIRA IN THE ROUGH-AND-TUM- BLE OF POLITICS



The subservient condition in which centuries of slavery had left those freedmen was such that they could not fully apprehend that there had been opposition to Monarchy long before the Golden Law, nor that the republican movement had for many years built its strength on the perpetuation of slavery, a system instituted from the start by the monarchic system.

Trapped by feelings that were anachronistic, premodern, or primitive (as was said at the time) these freedmen were also trapped by modern times. Their whole world disappeared when the Monarchy collapsed like a house of cards on November 15, 1889. That was the view generally held by Brazil's intellectuals at the dawn of the 20th century.²

Another perspective can be seen in articles published in *Cidade do Rio*, a newspaper managed by black journalist José do Patrocínio. A dedicated abolitionist, Patrocínio hailed the Black Guard in its first few months of existence as the incarnation of the political will of the newly-freed slaves. That entire population could now – for the first time, after centuries of bondage – talk politics in the public square. The message they delivered was, quite naturally, supportive of the measure that had freed them from the slaves' quarters. Little did they care, afire as they were with the radical heat of Abolition, for the burning resentment of hundreds of landowners and former bastions of Empire deprived of their property with no indemnity. Nor did they appreciate the extent of Republican outrage over the sudden popularity the monarchy had attained, thanks to the image of "Isabel the Redeemer."³

These polarized viewpoints were all buried under the political avalanche caused by the Proclamation of November Fifteenth. The bells that rang in the founding of the Republic also sounded the death knell of this fiery debate, now seen as something from the dead past, best forgotten on the shelves of museums and replaced by new issues, issues which the insurgent administration considered important to its agenda: citizenship, political reform, emigration and federalism...

A rewritten history of Brazil, unveiled in the mid-1980s for the centennial celebrations of the Abolition and the Republic, ushered in novel themes and new types of evidence completely unknown to the official history – and coming from unexpected directions.

The Black Guard was then and to this day remains one of the subjects of this revisionist re-examination of Brazilian history. Gone was the brief phenomenon shoehorned into the 18-month interval between May 13, 1888 and November 15, 1889, to be replaced by the realization that the Guard had much deeper roots in another familiar aspect of Brazilian

(2) For an overview of the sentiment in opposition to the Black Guard, widely subscribed by the white elite of the time, see the articles by Rui Barbosa in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* in 1889. BARBOSA, Rui. *Campanhas Jornalísticas*. Império (1869-1889. Obras Seletas, v. 6, Rio de Janeiro: Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1956 (especially the article titled "A arvore da desordem" published August 18, 1889), pp. 189-192.

(3) For a better picture of the "Blonde mother of Brazil," see SCHWARCZ, Lilia Moritz. "Dos males da dádiva: sobre as ambigüidades no processo da Abolição brasileira" in GOMES, Flávio dos Santos & CUNHA, Olívia Maria Gomes da. *Quase-cidadão: história e antropologias da pós-emancipação no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 2007.



culture – an aspect the details of which have only recently begun to emerge from the shadows of the past: capoeira.

Regarded for decades as an African custom, nurtured by slaves in their quarters in early colonial times, then transplanted to the runaway slave fastness – Quilombo dos Palmares – before becoming a full-fledged symbol of black culture, a slower, second reading showed capoeira to have emerged within the slave culture of Brazil, as something created in an urban environment by Africans and their native-born Creole descendants, and put to work throughout the towns and cities during the last century of Portuguese colonial rule. Once a form of resistance directed against the slavemasters and the slaveholding political State, in its expanded context it is perceived as an instrument for settling conflicts within the urban slave population itself. Once a sporting pastime (tomfoolery) pursued to get away from degrading, servile work, it is now focused on as an indispensable tool used by slaves and freedmen for empowerment within their own street environment. Capoeira in effect became a parallel govern-

ment, under which Negro hawkers and market slaves (who sold goods and services in public places) controlled the underground market in colonial towns.

As a subject in history, capoeira has in recent years experienced a metamorphosis of different meanings (on which there is no real consensus among researchers). Politics is a new topic, only recently broached.

In what follows⁴ I will attempt to show how important the Paraguayan war was in the cultural transformation affecting capoeira toward the end of the 19th century. This was Brazil's greatest war in the century before last; it lasted all of five years and paved the way for transformations which would wipe monarchy off of the map of South America.

That clash of arms made an impact on Brazil's popular opinion, which was felt for decades. To the impoverished black and brown inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, freedman

(4) SOARES, Carlos Eugênio Libano. *A negregada instituição: os capoeiras na Corte Imperial 1850-1890*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Access, 1994.

Once they'd fired their single shot, muzzleloading flintlocks were not much use. Capoeira fighting techniques, learned on the streets of faraway Rio de Janeiro, were the weapon of choice for Brazil's black and mulatto soldiers, whether from Rio, Recife or Salvador. In the thick of battle, capoeiras became legend.

and slave alike – the main practitioners of capoeira in those days – the war arrived in the form of press gangs that prowled the streets and raided the tenements, rounding up levies of “volunteers” for their country. Caged, tied and impressed into uniform, black capoeira experts were transferred *en masse* to the battlefields down south.

Once they'd fired their single shot, muzzleloading flintlocks were not much use. Capoeira fighting techniques, learned on the streets of faraway Rio de Janeiro, were the weapon of choice for Brazil's black and mulatto soldiers, whether from Rio, Recife or Salvador. In the thick of battle, capoeiras became legend.

There was a triumphant homecoming. Off they had gone as conscripted vagrants forced to march to the colors in the ranks of a discredited army, only to return as heroes. Some were weighted down with medals, and many were set free for their “sacrifice in blood” while serving in the Armed Forces (slaves were freed before enlistment). Once demobilized, they were back on the streets and, in some cases, seeking to regain “territory” given up when they were shipped off to the front.

But the political elite had other plans. Awed by the nimbleness of these capoeiras in battle, former commissioned officers, who afterward swelled the ranks of the political elite in the city of Rio de Janeiro, labored behind the scenes to use those former combatants as muscle in peacetime struggles.

And so capoeira made its debut on the political stage. This was not the micropolitics of slave gatherings, endemic to the first half of the 19th century, but the politics of convention halls, of the Liberal and Conservative parties, the corridors of Parliament, close elections and the logrolling methods of Parliamentary rule.

These were the days of the *Flor da Gente* – a capoeira outfit whose territory was the borough of Gloria in Rio de Janeiro, enlisted in the service of a powerful member of the Conservative party from a family steeped in politics – Duque-Estrada Teixeira. On his behalf they pitched themselves into the rough-and-tumble political battles of the campaign of 1872. In a blur of razor slashes, sweeps, spinning kicks and head butts those battle-scarred veterans of the Paraguayan War drove Liberal voters from the polling places and swept opposition candidates off of their raised platforms.

Duque-Estrada's victory in that Congressional race led political reporters of the time to instill new meaning into *Flor da Gente*: The Flower of My Gentry. The double meaning was coined when Duque-Estrada, questioned in Parliament as to who those *gentry* were who had been ordered to attack opposition voters and candidates on the streets. Duque-Estrada replied: “They were my gentry, the flower of my gentry.”

That phrase echoed in the halls of politics in Rio de Janeiro for the next 20 years.

These capoeiras did not always work for pay, as depicted by the liberal press of the time. They were also motivated by

THE BLACK GUARD: CAPOEIRA IN THE ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE OF POLITICS



the slavery crisis worldwide. In the United States, civil war had broken out after President-elect Lincoln removed all doubt surrounding his plans for emancipation. The defeat of the Confederacy left Brazil's elite as the Americas' only remaining slavocracy.

The passage by Parliament of an 1871 law freeing the sons of slaves (*Lei do Ventre Livre*) – pushed through by the Administration and the Conservative Party – strongly influenced public perceptions at the time. Its passage had been resisted by a coalition of Liberals and Conservative factions alarmed at the possibility of a shortage of slave labor for their farms. The Emperor's daughter – who signed the decree into law as acting Regent while Dom Pedro II was ill – and the Conservative Party leadership, gained enormous prestige in the eyes of the black population of Rio de Janeiro.

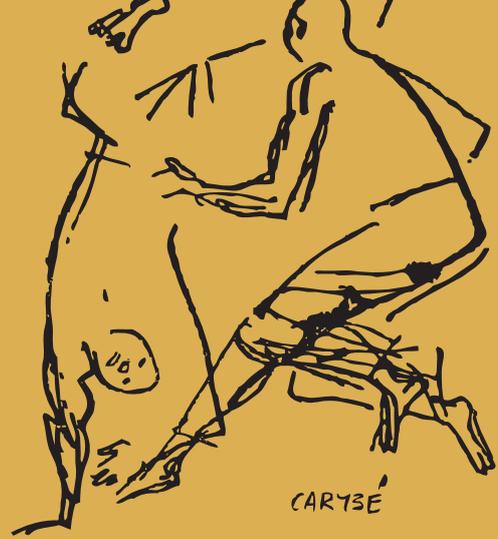
The capoeira outfits revelled in the heady air of politics in smoke-filled rooms, and were soon behaving like callous monarchists. They were set at the throats of the opposition by politicians in exchange for bribe money, complicity, and protection from the white man's courts and police. And so the strange alliance was riveted together. In their daily routine, capoeiristas dominated the streets, intimidated rivals, extorted protection money from vendors, harbored fugitive slaves and committed petty crimes. These underworld mob outfits defied the police from behind the protection of their political patrons and, if actually arrested through some careless error, were promptly freed.

On election day they concentrated in the vicinity of polling places – invariably churches, back in those days – and some mugged opposition voters (this was before the secret ballot), while others (repeaters, or *fósforos*) stuffed ballot boxes by impersonating absent voters, which usually lead to brawls. They also bribed voters and attacked the polls in precincts the opposition was sure to carry.

Their political fame quickly carried them even farther. By about 1870 it was obvious that the production center for the coffee monoculture of the time had shifted southward to São Paulo, leaving the state of Rio de Janeiro to its played-out fields and ruined plantations. The *nouveau riche* however, sat on the sidelines of imperial politics, largely dominated by the traditional elites in southeastern and northeastern Brazil. Emancipation was a clear threat to their slaveholding plantations, powered by the traffic in slaves from the north and northeast regions.

They were the heart and soul of the Republican Party. Organized in 1870, the party was an insignificant gathering, but many of its members were the cream of intellectual society. Its newspaper, *A República*, constantly attacked the conservative administration. This in turn sparked the first conflict involving capoeiras and Republicans: the raiding and attempted "breaking up" of the newspaper *A República*.

It was February 28, 1873, in the wake of Duque-Estrada's congressional victory with the help of capoeira's *Flor* gentry, followed by heated accusations of "promiscuous"



relations between politicians and capoeira outfits, that the newspaper's offices were pounded by a hail of stones, imprecations, and battering at its doors; a brat clambered up on the nameplate and blacked it out with paint. This the administration was promptly accused of having abetted.

Throughout the 1870s, collaborative agreements between monarchist politicians and the outfits of the capoeira mob dealt the Imperial Palace in Rio de Janeiro some very strong hands. When those classical liberals – ostracized for a decade – finally came to power in 1878, they ushered in the first police efforts against what a hostile press referred to as the "capoeira politicians"; this police campaign led to nothing.

The political atmosphere that breathed life into the Black Guard had been around for 15 years. Dom Pedro II and his heir to the throne, Isabel, were regarded as sympathetic toward abolitionist causes. Politicians from São Paulo, who largely controlled the Republican Party, were seen as irascible slave owners, busily selling the native sons of northeastern Creole families down the river to stand whippings in the slave pens of the Paraíba Valley.

By the time the Black Guard was afoot, those impolitic images had faded considerably. The Guard's defenders were embarrassed to be associated with movements described in the political press as authoritarian and criminal – as the *Flor da Gente* capoeiras of the 1870s were made out. To their enemies, waving that bloody shirt diverted attention away from the emancipation law (*Lei Áurea*), and therefore away from unhappy memories of the association between certain "liberal" politicians and the slavocracy.

The shapers of public opinion on both sides were therefore incapable of understanding the deeper causes which gave rise to the Black Guard. The first affray in which it was involved was an attack on a campaign rally featuring Silva Jardim, at the French Gymnastics Association. This attack occurred at Rua da Travessa da Barreira on December 31, 1888. Silva Jardim was on a nationwide speaking tour financed by the Republicans, and was capitalizing on the Monarchy's sudden loss of popularity among the landed gentry over the forfeiture of their investments in chattel "property."

That night, members of the Guard tried to force their way into the chamber in which Silva Jardim was making his speech. Members of his select audience promptly made

The Capoeira Party had a clear racial identity and catered to the specific needs of marginalized urban groups and working-class people, while repudiating all politicians bound up with the slaveholding system.

THE BLACK GUARD: CAPOEIRA IN THE ROUGH-AND-TUM- BLE OF POLITICS



ready to fight off the “murderous mob.” Thus surrounded, they had no choice but to fight their way clear – and fight they did. The police – whose precinct house was a few yards away – never lifted a finger. Some were darkly suspicious that the trap had been set with the connivance of high government officials. Almost nobody realized that the trail of gunpowder had been ignited many months before.

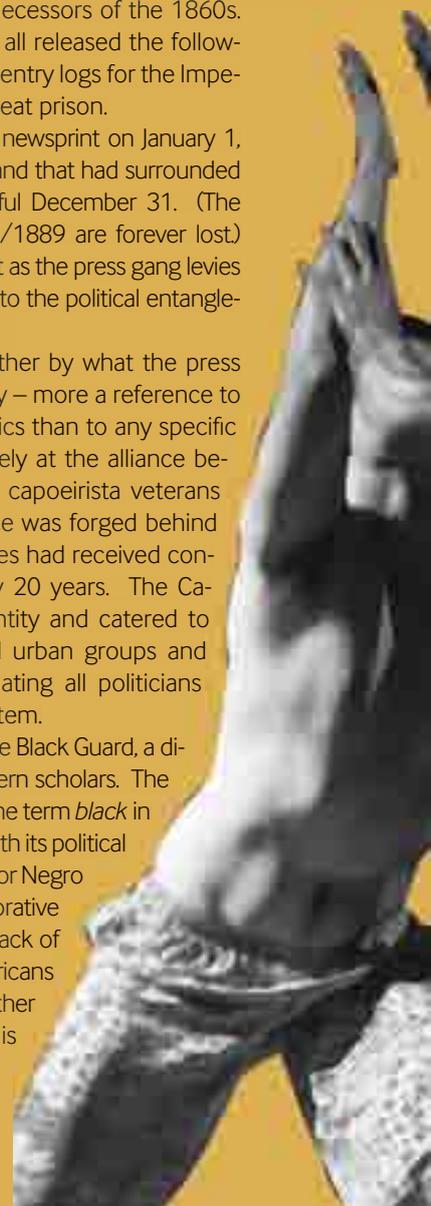
A singular event was recorded in the annals of Rio de Janeiro’s police history on July 12, 1888, when an entire capoeira outfit, or *malta*, was arrested in one fell swoop. Nor was this any ordinary outfit – it was the *Cadeira da Senhora* mob whose territory was the *Campo de Santana*, a large open area in the heart of the city. They were named after the Lady in the Chair, an image of *Santa Ana*, Christ’s grandmother, which decorated the main façade of the *Igreja de Santana* church before it was torn down to build the Dom Pedro II train station (today the Central do Brasil).

The arrest of an entire capoeira outfit was a rare item in a police report, given the immunity they got from well-connected politicians of the Crown. They were all booked, and newspaper reports indicated they would be drafted into the Army, much like their predecessors of the 1860s. Oddly enough, however, they were all released the following day. Their names appear on the entry logs for the Imperial House of Detention, the city’s great prison.

Those same names appeared in newsprint on January 1, 1889, cited as confederates of the band that had surrounded the French Association on that fateful December 31. (The House of Detention records for 1/1/1889 are forever lost.) The two events are clearly related, just as the press gang levies for the Paraguayan War were related to the political entanglements of capoeira during the 1870s.

The two events were tied together by what the press at the time called the Capoeira Party – more a reference to ways of getting things done in politics than to any specific group. The term was aimed squarely at the alliance between conservative politicians and capoeirista veterans of the Paraguayan War. The alliance was forged behind the scenes, even though both parties had received considerable press coverage for nearly 20 years. The Capoeira Party had a clear racial identity and catered to the specific needs of marginalized urban groups and working-class people, while repudiating all politicians bound up with the slaveholding system.

That is the added dimension of the Black Guard, a dimension not yet worked out by modern scholars. The Guard was the first institution to use the term *black* in a positive and self-referential sense, with its political meaning intact. In other words, black or Negro had for centuries been a strongly pejorative word, indicative of slaves, weakness, lack of fighting capacity, and submission. Africans and native sons in Brazil called each other Negroes as an insult. In that sense it is



related to the belittling sense of “nigger” which, in the United States, until fairly recently, was considered a swear word by American Negro (sic) movement insiders.

It is no coincidence that a political meaning was added to the term precisely at the moment in history at which the native-born blacks became an absolute majority among slaves and freedmen in Brazil, an outcome predicted back in 1850, when the trans-Atlantic traffic in African slaves was abolished. These native sons developed new political feelings – different from the ethnic sentiments so pervasive among the Africans – feelings around which the notion of a black race would crystallize.

The gauntlet the native sons of the Black Guard threw down before white racism was a new meaning for *Negro*, published in newspaper articles in *Cidade do Rio*, especially those signed by Clarindo de Almeida, the Guard’s mysterious leader. These broader meanings were lost on the writers of the time, and must be weighed by today’s scholars as diacritical marks for a new political language – a broad, sweeping, racial language – that was suddenly hushed up.

The second face-off between the Black Guard and Republicans occurred in Rio on July 14, 1889, during the Centennial celebration of the Storming of the Bastille, a red letter day for Republicanism. A band of celebrating Republicans was making its way down a street named Rua do Ouvidor at nightfall, and found their way barred by a detachment from the Black Guard. Fighting ensued, predictably enough, but this time the police stepped in and the records from the House of Detention have survived intact.

Alfredo Emygidio Prestello, a Portuguese national, age 18, cabinetmaker, residing at Rua do Monte; Albino Loureiro de Carvalho, also Portuguese, from Vila Real, age 21, domiciled at Travessa do Costa Velho; and Luiz Pinto Pereira, age 21, scrivener, birthplace Minas Gerais, residing at Rua da Gamboa, all of them white, fought on the Republican side. José Carlos Vieira, age 22, carpenter, olive-complexioned, residing at Rua Pedro de Alcântara, and José Antônio, black, age 20, birthplace Bahia, unemployed, are a sampling from the opposing side.⁵

Headlines blared news of the rumble all over the capital city. Middle-class *cariocas* grew more and more uncomfortable. Inaction on the part of government and failure by the police to establish order were noted with uneasiness by military men. All indications were that the João Alfredo Adminis-

tration’s Cabinet was somehow conniving in the situation, and the Republicans were transformed overnight, from fierce opposition critics to hapless victims of a conspiracy hatched by the powers-that-be. The Black Guard, once the darlings of many intellectuals, outcasts to whom columns of newsprint were dedicated (something unheard-of in Brazil in those days), were now stigmatized as brigands and rowdies in the pay of the government, “roving gangs” of violent muggers. The accusations heaped upon the *Flor da Gente* capoeiras in earlier times were again dusted off and recited.

The political climate rekindled some very unkind stereotyping of the “Negro race.” Ill-prepared to cope with the full measure of political freedom thrust upon them as of May 13, 1888, it was suggested they ought to be dealt with by the police or again set to labor in the fields, under the watchful eye of the political State. Those “May 13ths,” as the legally emancipated freedmen were called, who had barely tasted the air of freedom, now bowed under the weight of new restrictions heaped upon them by “capitalist” bourgeois society.

The dark clouds of race warfare that had gathered in the time of the Black Guard were doubtless uppermost in the minds of Brazil’s high officials on the eve of the uprising that toppled the monarchy. But the toppling of the Guard had begun even earlier. In July of 1889 – the month of the street rumble on Rua do Ouvidor – João Alfredo’s Cabinet collapsed, and the Liberal Party rose to power in the person of the Visconde de Ouro Preto.

What at first appeared to be a new beginning soon dragged the monarchy to its unhappy end. The Viscount had a terrible reputation. He had been Treasury Ministry in 1880, when he had the unfortunate idea of levying a new tax on streetcar fares. The tax threatened to diminish the already scant earnings of the urban population. The resulting riot over that farthing, the *Revolta do Vintém* was a rampage in which the population turned over streetcars, erected barricades around town and fought army troops. All of this brought whoops of joy from opposition journalists – namely, the Republicans and abolitionists. Over reports of many casualties, the Minister resigned and the tax was abolished. The *Revolta do Vintém* was the backdrop to both abolitionists’ and Republicans’ street campaigns.

Just days after the proclamation of the Republic, Generalíssimo Deodoro da Fonseca named Sampaio Ferraz chief of police for the Federal District. Sampaio promptly began work on his own agenda.

As a government prosecutor, Sampaio had for some time followed the movements of the capoeira outfits. He understood that the toppling of the regime would usher in a provisional government with dictatorial powers, the ideal environment in which to put an end to the mobs – and wipe out the last traces of the Black Guard in the process.

(5) All of these records are recorded in the House of Detention records titled *Livro de Matrículas da Casa de Detenção No. 4321, 15/07/1889*, Public Archives of the State of Rio de Janeiro.



Another century would go by before the Black Guard was again mentioned in the history books. In the meantime, theories propounding the “social uprooting” of Negroes as explaining their inability to cope with the “new” bourgeois order contributed little to the furtherance of historical research.

THE BLACK GUARD: CAPOEIRA IN THE ROUGH-AND-TUM- BLE OF POLITICS



Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares. Earned his B.A. and licenciature in History at UFRJ, and Master's in History at UNICAMP. PhD., History, UNICAMP. Associate Professor of History at UFBA

In a matter of months, hundreds of capoeiristas, both active and “retired” (too old for that kind of work) were arbitrarily arrested. Initially held at the Santa Cruz prison, they were herded into a steamer and shipped off to the federal government's prison on the island of Fernando de Noronha.

In less than a year Sampaio did away with the last traces of the Capoeira Party, and the Black Guard to boot. October saw the publication of a new Criminal Code for the Republic, making capoeira illegal, as most of its practitioners wasted away in their mid-Atlantic prison. What eventually happened to them remains a mystery. Another century would go by before the Black Guard was again mentioned in the history books. In the meantime, theories propounding the “social uprooting” of Negroes as explaining their inability to cope with the “new” bourgeois order contributed little to the furtherance of historical research. We had to wait until after the military regime of 1964 was done away with before we could review certain events in official historical records, and revisit the subject of the Black Guard.

Bibliography

BARBOSA, Rui. *Campanhas Jornalísticas. Império (1869-1889)*, Obras Seletas, v. 6, Rio de Janeiro: Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1956.

BERGSTRESSER, Rebecca Baird. *The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in Rio de Janeiro, 1880-1889*, Stanford University Press, 1973.

DUQUE-ESTRADA, Osório. *Abolição: esboço histórico*. Rio de Janeiro: Leite Ribeiro, 1908.

GOMES, Flávio dos Santos & CUNHA, Olívia Maria Gomes da. *Quase-cidadão: história e antropologias da pós-emancipação no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 2007.

GOMES, Flávio dos Santos. “No meio das águas turvas (racismo e cidadania no alvorecer da República; a Guarda Negra na Corte, 1888-1889)” *In Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 21, pp. 75-96, December of 1991.

MAGALHÃES JUNIOR, Raimundo. *A vida turbulenta de José do Patrocínio*. Rio de Janeiro: Sabiá, 1969.

ORICO, Osvaldo. *O tigre da abolição*. Rio de Janeiro: 2nd. ed. 1953.

SOARES, Carlos Eugênio Líbano. *A negregada instituição: os capoeiras na Corte Imperial 1850-1890*, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Access, 1994.

TROCHIM, Michael. “The Brazilian Black Guard: racial conflict in post-abolition in Brazil” *In The Americas*, v. XLIV, January, 1988.