

CAPOEIRA IS DEFENSE, ATTACK, HANDLING ONESELF, AND A RASCAL'S SKILLS

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WHILE STROLLING THROUGH THE PARK IN MANY PARTS OF BRAZIL ONE MIGHT HAPPEN UPON A CULTURAL EXHIBITION KNOWN AS "CAPOEIRA." IT IS A WARRIOR SPORT, PRACTICED BY MEN AND WOMEN OF ALL AGES, WHICH HAS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. THE RITUAL PRACTICE TAKES THE FORM OF A CIRCLE OR SEMICIRCLE CALLED THE CAPOEIRA "RODA," WHERE TWO PRACTITIONERS STAGE A COMBATIVE BOUT IN NIMBLE MOVEMENTS, FASCINATING IN THEIR BEAUTY AND FORM. ACCOMPANYING EACH BOUT IS MUSIC PRODUCED BY AN ENSEMBLE CONSISTING OF A MUSICAL BOW, OR BERIMBAU, CONGA DRUMS, HOLLOW SCRAPERS, TAMBOURINES, WOVEN RATTLES, WHISTLES, DRUMS AND MALIMBAS. THE SONGS THEMSELVES, DITTIES, QUATRAINS AND LITANIES, ARE CALLED TOADAS, QUADRAS, CORRIDOS AND LADAINHAS. THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT STYLES AND TEMPOS FOR PLAYING THE BERIMBAUS THAT SET THE PACE FOR CAPOEIRA CIRCLES. PRACTITIONERS WEAR ARTICLES OF CLOTHING – RIBBONS, SASHES OR ROPES – TO INDICATE THEIR STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT IN CAPOEIRA. THERE ARE ALWAYS MASTERS (MESTRES) PRESENT, TEACHING AND GUIDING ALL PROGRESS IN THE SPORT.



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It is always difficult to generalize about capoeira, for throughout its history it has evolved into different forms or schools, and its practitioners come from all income levels and walks of life. At root, it was something practiced by African slaves in Brazil, and grew out of cultural connections among representatives of the various African ethnic groups, captured and transported to Brazil as slaves. Police records going back to the 1820s tell of slaves arrested for practicing capoeira in Rio de Janeiro, and describe a multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds, among them people from Angola – including Cassange – and from the Congo, Mozambique, and other nations.

In the 19th century, capoeira was very widespread and systematically practiced primarily in Rio de Janeiro, where police authorities sought to suppress it. Stories about its adepts (*capoeiras*, or *capoeiristas*) go back to the late 18th century. A landmark figure was “Major Vidigal,” a police officer famous for using capoeira in his confrontations with runaway slaves, shamans and other *capoeiras*. But it is only after the organization of civil and military police forces that records of capoeiras begin turning up with any sort of regularity in historical sources. In the early 19th century capoeiras were already a familiar sight in the city of Rio de Janeiro. From 1810 to 1821, out of the 4853 people arrested by the police in that city, 438 (9%) were charged with practicing capoeira. It was during this period that the capoeiras organized into outfits and got involved in power politics in the capital city of Rio de Janeiro. They also took sides in relations between the masters and the slaves, and among the slaves themselves.

Back in those days, capoeira practitioners were organized into “capoeira mobs” called *maltas* (like the island near Sicily), claiming as their territory the various boroughs into which the city was divided. This pattern of organization predominated throughout all of Brazil. In addition to straight razors, they used hook knives, musical instruments and wooden clubs as weapons in their rumbles. By no means, however, did they only practice fighting techniques. They invented an elaborate tradition around capoeira, which included names and war cries for each group.

One of the greatest independent *capoeiristas* of the time, Plácido de Abreu, explains that in the second half of the 19th century, Rio’s capoeiras were divided into two big mobs, or nations, the “Nagoa” and the “Guaiamu.” In fact, each nation was made up of a number of different capoeira outfits, generally organized by boroughs, so that a nation amounted to an alliance among various groups which monopolized specific areas of the city. Historians have not yet arrived at a categorical definition of the terms that refer to these two inner-city nations. But the information handed down by Plácido de Abreu does outline many features of these groups, most importantly, the jargon or lingo they spoke. From that vantage point, we gain an inside perspec-

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(1) Capoeira practitioners who did not belong to any outfit or mob were called *amadores* (amateurs).

tive from an individual who was an active participant in these organizations as an "amateur" practitioner.¹

That writer left behind a most fascinating report on the capoeiras of the 19th century. For instance, he wrote that the Nagoas and Guaiamus in Rio were themselves divided into various "parties." He also explained that a Guaiamu is any capoeira practitioner who belongs to either the downtown São Francisco party, or to the Santa Rita, Marinha, Ouro Preto or São Domingos de Gusmão parties, or to any of a number of smaller groups. Nagoa parties controlled the boroughs of Santa Luzia, São José da Lapa, Santana, Moura, Bolinha de Prata, and a few others. These outfits, which Plácido de Abreu called "parties," were themselves divided up by parishes and specific areas within the city's parishes. The partisans used symbols, such as colors, to set themselves apart – red for Guaiamus and white for Nagoas. According to Plácido de Abreu, they made use of war whoops with identifying symbols: "It's the Sword. It's Lapa. When it's from that province. It's the Lady in the chair. When it's from Sant'ana. It's the old carpenter. When it's from São José (St. Joseph). And so forth."



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They had public rituals for rumbles among the groups. "Whenever, for instance, a musical band left the downtown area, that is, Guaiamu territory, and headed out toward Lapa or Cidade Nova, capoeiras from those outfits would tag along, ready for a showdown with the Nagoas, since they were entering upon someone else's turf."

There were specific places for training: "Practice was held regularly on Sunday mornings, with training in head and foot blows, and razor and knife techniques. The more famous capoeiras acted as instructors for the beginners. Early on, the techniques were practiced using wooden weapons, then later, with actual edged weapons... which often left the exercise area somewhat bloodied."²

The ditties they sang were called *toadas*, and added comic relief as they issued their challenges:

Guaiamus would sing:

Terezinha de Jesus

Open the door and snuff the lamp

I want to see Nagoas die

At the door of the Bom Jesus

The Nagoas would reply:

The Castle has raised its flag

São Francisco did the same

Guaiamus are now complaining

Black Manoel has just arrived.

In answer to the suppression of capoeira by the Republican Provisional Government, there emerged a broad movement in defense of capoeiras which included people from all walks of life. A few Parliamentarians, such as Congressman Coelho Neto, leapt to its defense, and even got a movement started for making capoeira training official within the armed forces. This was precisely when hundreds of capoeiristas were being rounded up and prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 402. Within that discourse, the seeds of a capoeira forged by martial conflict sprouted, and gave rise to the idea of an "authentically Brazilian" sport.

Here is a statement by a renowned capoeira of the 1920s, Annibal Burlamaqui, better known as "Zuma."

"One could fairly say that all sports are practiced in Brazil. We have: rowing, swimming, soccer, basketball, boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, tennis, athletic sports in general, etc. Nowadays even polo and golf are played in our country. It is a shame, however, that to this day we have nothing to offer as the national sport. Much is said about Brazilian national art, Brazilian music... even of Brazilian policy."

Zuma was a pioneer in Rio de Janeiro's new capoeira, and claimed that a number of techniques, such as the *baú*, were copied from "*batuques*" and hard "*sambas*." This is a belly-blow to the adversary, analogous in movements to the belly-bumping "*samba de umbigada*." According to Zuma, that same move was also used in the more delicate "*batuques lisos*." Another move, the "*rapa*," was used in the heavier "*batuques pesados*." They also explained that there were *tapeação* or "trickery," moves, which served only to confound one's adversary.

Zuma also set down a few rules, exercises and training procedures for teaching capoeira: "First I conceived of a martial arts field where, given enough space, one could practice *Brazilian gymnastics*."

(2) Party meant the same thing as capoeira mob. They were organized around the boroughs and parishes of old Rio de Janeiro.

A practice common to all capoeiristas in Brazil was the acquisition of a nickname, a custom that has survived to this day. While capoeira practitioners in Rio de Janeiro worked on their version, closely bound up with martial arts, capoeiristas in Bahia – largely overlooked by historians reviewing the 19th century – came up with two separate capoeira styles of their own: capoeira angola and capoeira regional. Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Bimba were the leading practitioners of these two styles or schools of capoeira.

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The field Zuma had in mind for training bouts was in the shape of a circle, with a letter “Z” drawn inside it. For all competitions, there would be a referee to mark time for the bout and monitor the players’ movements. The duration of a single bout was not to exceed one hour, divided into three-minute rounds, with two-minute rest periods. At every break, the two contenders were introduced in the center of the ring, so that the referee could more easily monitor the contest. In the event of a draw, an additional half-hour extension would be granted, interspersed with longer rest periods. If the stalemate were to continue, the referee would then order a “last man standing” round in which the two combatants would continue until one of them dropped (a TKO) with no rest breaks. These bouts were to be held on soccer fields.

Despite intensive efforts aimed at suppressing capoeira, beginning in the early 19th century, and lasting through its inclusion in the Criminal Code in 1890, the forces of resistance held their ground and the sport was reinvented beginning in the 1920s. Its adepts and practitioners elevated its status as a national symbol, and identified it with sports, dance, music and, most importantly, martial arts.

Unlike in Rio de Janeiro, no Draconian suppression tactics were used against capoeira in Bahia during the 19th century. The police there did not prosecute anyone under Article 402 of the 1890 Criminal Code. There were, however, numerous arrests of capoeiras in Bahia in the early 20th century. They were charged with assault, under Article 303 of the 1890 Criminal Code. Capoeiristas in Bahia’s capital also organized themselves in ways reminiscent of the capoeira mobs and outfits in the boroughs of Rio de Janeiro, then the nation’s capital.³

The capoeiras of Bahia’s capital became famous and are more vividly remembered by today’s capoeiristas than their cohorts in Rio de Janeiro. Prominent among those champions of the times are Pedro Mineiro, Antônio Boca de Porco, Bemenol, Chico Três Pedacos, Feliciano Bigode de Sêda and Besouro Mangangá – the most famous of all. A practice common to all capoeiristas in Brazil was the acquisition of a nickname, a custom that has survived to this day.

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Capoeira angola first appeared in Bahia in the 1920s, most prominently among a group organized by Querido de Deus, nickname of a capoeira who worked as a stevedore

(3) The city of Salvador is the capital of the State of Bahia. Carioca refers to the city of Rio de Janeiro.

at Bahia's old Gold Quay. But the man who gave capoeira angola its systematic structure and laid down its ritual rules, tempos, and beautiful rhythms – and provided uniforms, thereby lending a sporting aspect to this cultural demonstration – was Mestre Pastinha. To him, capoeira angola was a part of Brazil's national culture. Many indeed were the practitioners of capoeira angola, men like Mestre Valdemar da Paixão, Mestre Noronha, Mestre Tibúrcio, Mestre Canjiquinha, Mestre Caiçara, Mestre João Pequeno and Mestre João Grande, to name a few, each with his own personal touch. Mestre Bimba, on the other hand, increased the number of techniques and rhythms, laying emphasis on the songs and formally establishing the basic musical instruments as simply two tambourines and one berimbau. His innovations have become predominant throughout all of Brazil.

Capoeira regional was quickly carried to all points in Brazil by its practitioners from Bahia. One can comb the Brazilian nation from top to bottom and find hardly any isolated village

or hamlets without some sort of capoeira practice. Capoeira angola practitioners followed in the wake of those capoeira regional pioneers some decades later. When they arrived, however, they brought with them the seed crystal around which a global capoeira culture would soon form. Capoeira is currently practiced on every continent, and is increasingly regarded as a cultural and national symbol of Brazil.

It is true that the jaundiced eye of prejudice and the law-enforcement machinery it controlled became less onerous as time went on. In 1937 capoeira was decriminalized, for it had attained an entirely new social standing. Black culture increasingly became a more highly-valued component in the evolving process of ethnic inclusion among Brazil's national symbols, and Brazil was soon introducing capoeira to the world as one of its most precious treasures, the outcome of syncretism over the ages in which the influx from many different African, European and indigenous ethnicities developed into something with that unique identity that is capoeira, with its peculiarly Brazilian traits.



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