

CAPOEIRA ANGOLA RITUAL CIRCLE PERFORMANCE

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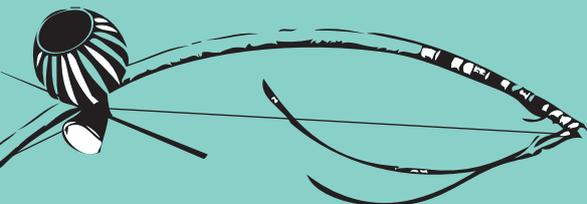
MARTIAL DANCE-FIGHTING, ART, RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION, THERAPY, CULTURE, ENTERTAINMENT, RITUAL, OR EVEN "A WAY OF BEING," ARE AMONG THE HOST OF DEFINITIONS OR QUALITIES ATTRIBUTED TO CAPOEIRA. THIS PHYSICAL PRACTICE IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULAR THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, AND ITS MESSAGE IS COINED IN DIFFERENT VALUES, DEPENDING ON THE STYLE OF CAPOEIRA ADOPTED: ANGOLA, REGIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY.



CARYSE

All of these virtues can be seen in full bloom in the organization of the ritual (the capoeira circle, or *roda*), in which considerable pains are taken to reproduce the specific knowledge and language characteristic of the Angola style of capoeira. Let us now join the circle....

CAPOEIRA ANGOLA RITUAL CIRCLE PERFORMANCE



Capoeira originated in Brazil during slavery, and since then has been tracking the development of our society in all its myriad ways. According to Lima (1991: 10-12) its historical development in Brazil can be traced through four basic stages. In Imperial times, before the abolition of slavery, the main purpose of capoeira was self-defense. After Brazil became a Republic, capoeira gained added attractions as a visible aspect of black culture, and here it was known as Capoeira Angola.¹ Under the nationalist regime presided by Getúlio Vargas in the mid-1930s, capoeira was organized as a form of gymnastics, and was finally adopted as a sport by the National Sports Council in 1972. The 1930s also saw the development of a new, regional style of capoeira created by Manuel dos Reis Machado (*Mestre Bimba*) of Bahia, which today is known as Capoeira Regional. More recently, a new term was coined for innovative variations on Capoeira Regional by *Mestre Camisa* of the “ABADÁ Capoeira” group², namely, “Contemporary Capoeira,” the style now practiced by most capoeira enthusiasts. Paralleling these three different styles of capoeira we have different types of capoeira circles, and the different values which they impart.³

It is not my intention here to delve into those differences, for that would involve still another research paper. Our purpose is to illustrate the strict form underlying ritual performance.⁴ To do so we will focus specifically on the style known as capoeira angola, and describe the capoeira circles based on the Capoeira Angola Sports Center, which is the Academy organized by João Pequeno de Pastinha (CECA – AJPP),⁵ and which serves as a touchstone for capoeira tradition. We mustn't forget that *Mestre João Pequeno de Pastinha* (born December 27, 1917) is, at age 89, the living history of capoeira. His school and style is a model for practitioners and has been brought to the rest of the world by his students, the most important among them being *Mestre Pé de Chumbo*.

We generally observe, in the discourse and teachings of angola *Mestres* (masters), some emphasis on the preservation of tradition and the fundamentals of Angola-style capoeira. Among these we would highlight, as examples, respect, justice, humility and patience. All of these virtues can be seen in full bloom in the organization of the ritual (the capoeira circle, or *roda*), in which considerable pains are taken to reproduce the

(1) In 1922, the very cream of Bahia's capoeira practitioners created the *Conceição da Praia Capoeira Angola Center* (*Mestre Bola Sete*, 2001: 29).

(2) Associação Brasileira de Apoio e Desenvolvimento da Arte – Capoeira. (Brazilian Capoeira Art Support and Development Association)

(3) *Rodas* are the ritual circle performances through which capoeira is practiced and given expression.

(4) To Turner (1982: 13), “the anthropology of the performance is an essential part of the anthropology of the experience” and furthermore, “every type of cultural performance, including rituals, ceremonies, Carnival, and theatre are explanations of life, as often set forth by Dilthey.” And the expression, in turn, is in itself “a process which impels one to an expression which perfects it.” To illustrate the claim, the author calls upon the etymology of the word “performance” which he claims, “has nothing to do with ‘form,’ but rather, is derived from the old French *parfournir*, ‘to complete’ or ‘accomplish perform painstakingly/rigorously/totally.’ Hence, the completion is the purpose of an experience.” [Translations]. For more on the theory and method, see the thesis titled “Da inversão à re-inversão do olhar: ritual e performance na capoeira angola” (SIMÕES, 2006).

(5) The main office is at the Forte da Capoeira in Salvador (BA), but there are schools in São Paulo (Indaiatuba, Campinas, São Carlos, Presidente Prudente, Bauru, Sorocaba, Capital); Minas Gerais and in other countries, such as Mexico, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, the United States etc.



Master Poloca in the *roda*
Nzinga Capoeira Angola Group

Rita Barreto.

specific knowledge and language characteristic of the Angola style of capoeira. Let us now join the circle....

CAPOEIRA ANGOLA RITUAL PERFORMANCE, DESCRIBED IN CONTEXT.

(...) practically every object, every gesture, song or prayer, or slice of space and time is accepted on faith as something other than itself. It is more than it appears to be, and often, quite a lot more. (Turner 1974: 29)

At the ritual performance one is struck by its polysemy/multivocality. Thus, the way the Academy is decorated – including spaces for hanging the berimbau, rainbow wall paintings (the CECA – AJPP logo), framed photographs of famous masters (in honor of the heritage, and retelling the story of capoeira angola) – down to the uniforms, the body movements and musical style; all of these constitute the numerous languages of capoeira angola.

Students arrive early to prepare the ritual space for the circle or *roda*. They clean the floor and straighten out the benches, while others tune the musical instruments and set up the three conga drums for the ritual performance. There are also spares, for if the steel wire on the berimbau (the bowstring)⁶ breaks during the ceremony, the berimbau must be quickly replaced without interrupting practice.

Ritual performance in capoeira consists of the circle, which represents “this old world of God’s” (the universe). A complete description would necessarily cover the music, and embark upon themes of self, the hierarchy of rank, moral values, and so on. Then there are the innumerable pairs of opposition stances, contrasting resistance and submission moves, on your feet and on the floor, close in and outside, joy and pain (sadness), sport and fun, combat and oppression, straightforwardness and indirection, hand versus foot,⁷ and so on. The circle is a fisheye lens which takes in the whole of capoeira’s symbolic universe.

Mestre Bola Sete claims there are many masters who believe that capoeira, created by Africans in Brazil, has its origins in ancient African rituals.

Câmara Cascudo (1967: 183) likewise draws parallels between capoeira and African dances as he points to the *N’Golo* (Dance of the Zebras) as a Warriors’ dance pertaining to rites of passage, in which adolescent boys dance/compete for the benefit of young female spectators.

Prior to the 1930s, capoeira was not practiced indoors (in academies), so we would hardly be surprised if the ritual then were different from that of today. Back then it was a

(6) *Verga* describes the wood that bends to produce the berimbau. A favorite type of wood for making the berimbau is *biriba*, as mentioned in songs: “Biriba é pau, é pau/Oi biriba é pau para fazer berimbau...” (public domain).

(7) In an open *corrido* the leader (or *puxador*, generally the mestre, or someone else of similar rank) sings: “É a mão pelo pé” (hand for foot) and the chorus replies “O pé pela mão” (foot for hand); then the leader sings “É o pé pela mão” (foot for hand) and the chorus responds “A mão pelo pé” (hand for foot). These verses are repeated over and over.

Early on at these *rodas*, a harmony is found among the musical instruments, the singing (*ladainhas*, *quadras* and *corridos*), and especially the players, whose communication is physical rather than verbal.

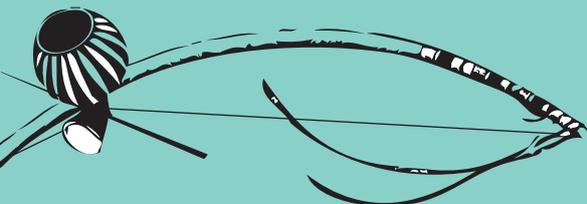
struggle for freedom and survival, and as recreation, capoeira was practiced at the sugarcane mills, on hillsides, streets, dockside, street markets and neighborhood squares. In photographs taken back then we note the difference in the number of berimbaus, the percussion setups, clothing, etc.

It is in the city of Salvador (Bahia) that the capoeira Angola academies, which trace their lineage back to *Mestre Pastinha*, try to keep up the tradition they had in the 1930s. The capoeira Angola groups scattered throughout the world also follow the pattern outlined by *Mestre Pastinha*, which is why my report on the ritual performance is based on CECA – AJPP, for *Mestre João Pequeno* is considered to be *Mestre Pastinha*'s main student, and responsible for handing down this art.⁸

A CAPOEIRA ANGOLA CIRCLE.

(...) it is one thing to watch people going through the stylized movements and singing the enigmatic songs that make up the ritual practice, but achieving a proper understanding of what those movements and words mean to them is something else entirely. (Turner, 1974: 20)

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People generally arrange themselves in a circle at these *rodas*, but they also sometimes form squares or rectangles. Every group will organize one of these inside its academy about once a week, throughout the year. There is also a party, the Capoeira Angola Event, which brings together the various groups, much like national and international meets. These are typically sponsored or organized by a specific capoeira Angola group, and a number of different *Mestres* and their students participate.

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CAPOEIRA INSTRUMENTS AND RANK. The main instrument in a capoeira Angola circle is the berimbau – which is the highest-ranked – and the tempo and style to be played is settled at its foot, at the “*pé-do-berimbau*.”⁹ The instrument comes in three types: the *berra-boi* or *gunga*¹⁰ is the deepest bass, which generally “runs” the circle and is played by a *Mestre* or close associate. Next in rank (which in capoeira signifies the player’s experience or wisdom) is the midrange *médio*, followed by the tenor *viola*.

(8) In a formal statement, *Mestre Pastinha*, said: *I give you two real mestres, not improvised teachers*, referring to *Mestre João Pequeno* and *Mestre João Grande* (the latter lives in New York).

(9) *Gunga* is loosely used as a synonym for *berimbau*.

(10) When the two capoeiristas are hunkered down (squatting) in front of the three berimbaus.

For each berimbau there is a specific tune or harmony. The three blend together to prompt body movements that are predominantly slow, but broader and swifter movements will also be called forth at appropriate times, depending on the rhythm established by the berimbaus.

The instrument section in capoeira is called a *bateria*, ranked as follows: the three berimbaus (*gunga*, *médio*, *viola*), one or two *tambourines*, *agogô* bells, a *reco-reco* (scratcher gourd) and a conga drum or *atabaque*.

The figure below shows an example of the sequence of instruments in a *bateria*:



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Mestre João Pequeno with his playing partner at the foot of the berimbau. Mestre João Pequeno in the picture is singing an original litany "When I arrived here" (Quando eu aqui cheguei, fully transcribed below). Litanies are usually sung at the foot of the berimbau when the mestre himself comes into play, so this one was not sung from the mestre's position on the gunga. Observe that only three

berimbaus and a tambourine are playing. Rank in the bateria is typically more strictly observed for the instruments played during the litany. Here, Mestre Moraes is playing the bass or gunga, Mestre Ciro the midrange and Mestre Pé de Chumbo the tenor viola. Playing the tambourine is Professor Topete; all of these musicians are important characters in the world of capoeira.

The *ladainha* litany (verses 1 to 17)¹⁴ is a type of song in which one may tell a story, say a prayer, sing praise, unburden oneself, issue a challenge, a warning, etc. It is sung solo, that is, as a prompt by the leader.

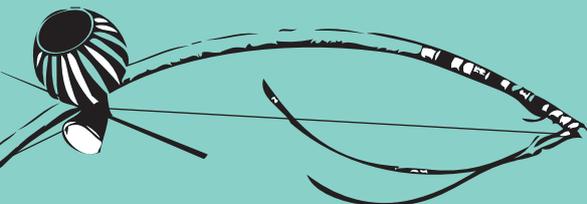
CAPOEIRA SONGS. Before the start of the first bout, the *Mestre*, or whoever is at the *gunga*, or perhaps one of the practitioners crouched before the musical bow, will sing a litany. As an illustration of how a *roda* is begun by *Mestre* João Pequeno de Pastinha, transcribed and translated below is his original composition, *Quando eu aqui cheguei*.

When I arrived here

lê¹¹

- 01 - When I arrived here
- 02 - When I arrived here
- 03 - I came to praise everyone,
- 04 - I came to praise the Lord first
- 05 - and the people who live here
- 06 - Now I sing
- 07 - I sing a song in praise
- 08 - I am praising Jesus Christ
- 09 - I am praising Jesus Christ
- 10 - because he blessed us
- 11 - I am praising and I'm praying
- 12 - to the father who created us
- 13 - blessed the city
- 14 - bless the city
- 15 - With all who live here
- 16 - and in the capoeira circle
- 17 - bless the players, my little friend
- 18 - He has the power (L)¹²
- 19 - Yea, he has the power, friend (C)¹³
- 20 - Yo, he has the power (L)
- 21 - Yea he has the power, friend (C)
- 22 - Yo, he knows how to play (L)
- 23 - Yea, he knows how to play, friend (C)
- 24 - Yo he plays from here to there (L)
- 25 - Yea, he plays yonder, friend (C)
- 26 - Yo, he plays hither, friend (L)
- 27 - Yea, play over here, friend (C)
- 28 - Yo, the world did a turn (L)
- 29 - Yea, what the world has given (C)
- 30 - Yo, what the world gives (L)
- 31 - Yea, what the world gives, friend (C)

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(11) "lê" (like yea), is often sung to begin the circle practice, or to begin a bout between mestres and/or to restart interrupted bouts, usually due to non-approved conduct during play.

(12) (L) for Leader (puxador, solista); (C) for Chorus

(13) "lê" is often sung to begin the circle practice, or to begin a bout between mestres and/or to restart interrupted bouts, usually due to non-approved conduct during play.

(14) Para dar suporte à análise, antecedendo cada verso, há um número correspondente a ele. E, a partir da "chula", há no final de cada verso a letra (P) que significa puxador e a letra (C), que significa coro.

(15) Mestre João Pequeno has traveled the world teaching capoeira Angola.

The *ladainha* litany (verses 1 to 17)¹⁴ is a type of song in which one may tell a story, say a prayer, sing praise, unburden oneself, issue a challenge, a warning, etc. It is sung solo, that is, as a prompt by the leader. *Mestre* João Pequeno's litany brings together a prayer and a song of praise, placing God on a higher plane than the "residents" (whether of his hometown or somewhere he is passing through)¹⁵.

So he first praises God, petitioning for protection from life's dangers, then praises the capoeiristas at the circle, to charm his audience, put everyone at ease and curb unnecessary impetuosity. At this point, the two players are hunkered down at the foot of the berimbau, listening to the message (with no acrobatics). Only the three berimbaus and tambourine(s) accompany the litany.

Right after the litany/*ladainha* (usually after the word "camaradinha", see verse 17 above) comes the *chula* (verses 18 to 31). Here, the singer or leader (usually the *Mestre*) sings a verse and the participants respond in chorus, repeating the leader's verse in song. The players also join in the chorus and point to each other, then raise both hands to lend emphasis to the statement that "he has the power, knows how to play" etc.

The lyrics *Oi volta que mundo deu* (Yo, the world did a turn), tell the players they may begin practice. They make the sign of the cross, and greet each other with a brotherly handshake.¹⁶

From that point forward the singing turns to corridos, which also feature chorus responses that, unlike the *chula*, are unchanging and specific to each *corrido*. At this stage each player will typically perform, while facing each other, a fall on the kidneys (*queda de rim*) toward the berimbaus, as both a salute and a way of expressing respect for the rules of the game, as orchestrated by the musicians/*bateria*; here is an example:

Tem dendê

- 1 – Dendê spice, dendê is nice (P)
- 2 - Angola practice adds dendê (P)
- 3 - Dendê spice, dendê is nice (C)
- 4 - Floor techniques will add dendê (P)
- 5 - Dendê spice, dendê is nice (C)

If we realize that dendê palm oil is an important ingredient in Bahia for spicing up food, we see that this *corrido* is sung while the game is "savory," looking good, well done... at a time when the players are elegantly communicating through body language. To start up the *corrido*, the first two verses are called out by the *Mestre* (or his substitute) as leader. After the fourth verse, the chorus alternates in response to each verse called out (over and over until the bout seems to need some other type of song, or the *bateria* signals another type of action).



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Another *corrido* which may be sung to lay emphasis on the body language (with the two players forming the dialogue) and/or bring to mind that there are moves and countermoves during play (in the event of unmatched moves), to wit:

Oi sim, sim, sim, oi, não, não, não

- Oh yes, yes, yes (L)
- Oh no, no, no (L)
- Oh yes, yes, yes (C)
- Oh no, no, no (C)
- Oh yes, yes, yes, yes (L)
- Oh no, no, no, no (L)
- Oh yes, yes, yes (C)
- Oh no, no, no (C)
- Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes (L)
- Oh no, no, no, no, no (L)
- Oh yes, yes, yes (C)
- Oh no, no, no (C)



MRE Collection

(6) Or "Iê dá volta ao mundo," (Yea, go around the world).

The attitude with which a player approaches the circle or faces life is one of challenge and struggle for social justice. As we follow its ritual performance we observe that it privileges neither left nor right, and favors neither the high nor humble station. Instead, it strikes a balance between opposing parties, whatever their number, in a continuous exercise of humility and patience.

Closing Remarks about Capoeira Practice. Participants include the *Mestres*, students, and even the audience in the case of an open circle. Anyone not participating in the bouts or playing an instrument pays attention of the game and takes part in the chorus. Capoeira angola is a thoughtful, conscious sport in which the capoeirista attacks in self-defense, striving at all times to do the right thing (which extends into everyday life outside the circle). Each must observe the other, and analyze their moves in order to know what he is up against, to whom he or she is relating. One's attention must encompass not only the game, but also what is being sung, for the songs are the vehicle for teaching capoeira, inasmuch as they are the form of guidance for the nonverbal communication (body language) between the players.

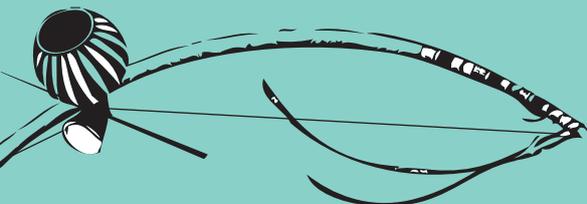
Attack and defense moves, such as basic steps, feints, spinning kicks, mule kicks, falls, freezes, and other moves which make up capoeira angola are so executed as to comprise a nonverbal dialogue between the two contestants. The main thing is not to attack, but rather, to know how to defend oneself. Hence the emphasis on the virtues of respect, patience, humility, balance – and therefore justice – which are the primary values sought by the practitioner of capoeira angola. Balance, for instance, is understood in its broadest meaning, that is, the idea of balance carries forward into other aspects of life, so that the capoeira angola practitioner, or *angoleiro*, works constantly toward a sense of inner balance, not only in practicing the body movements specific to capoeira, but also with regard to others in daily life.

One is therefore justified in saying that the practice of capoeira angola is itself an exercise in the control of violence, for everything must be done politely, in good fun (for sport) and respectfully. That's "other" person, the adversary, is in fact your buddy (partner in practice) – someone who makes it possible for you to go on learning.

Capoeira practitioners have no set time limits. Any given bout can go on for five or 10 minutes, or half an hour. But whenever the berimbau "calls" with a specific rhythm, or is tilted forward, that signals the end of the bout and summons the players back before the berimbaus. The players once again proceed to the foot of the berimbau, pay homage to one another, like good companions, and make way as the next two capoeiras enter the circle.

Astute reckoning goes into the movements of capoeira Angola. The attitude with which a player approaches the circle or faces life is one of challenge and struggle for social justice. As we follow its ritual performance we observe that it privileges neither left nor right, and favors neither the high nor humble station. Instead, it strikes a balance between opposing parties, whatever their number, in a continuous exercise of humility and patience.

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