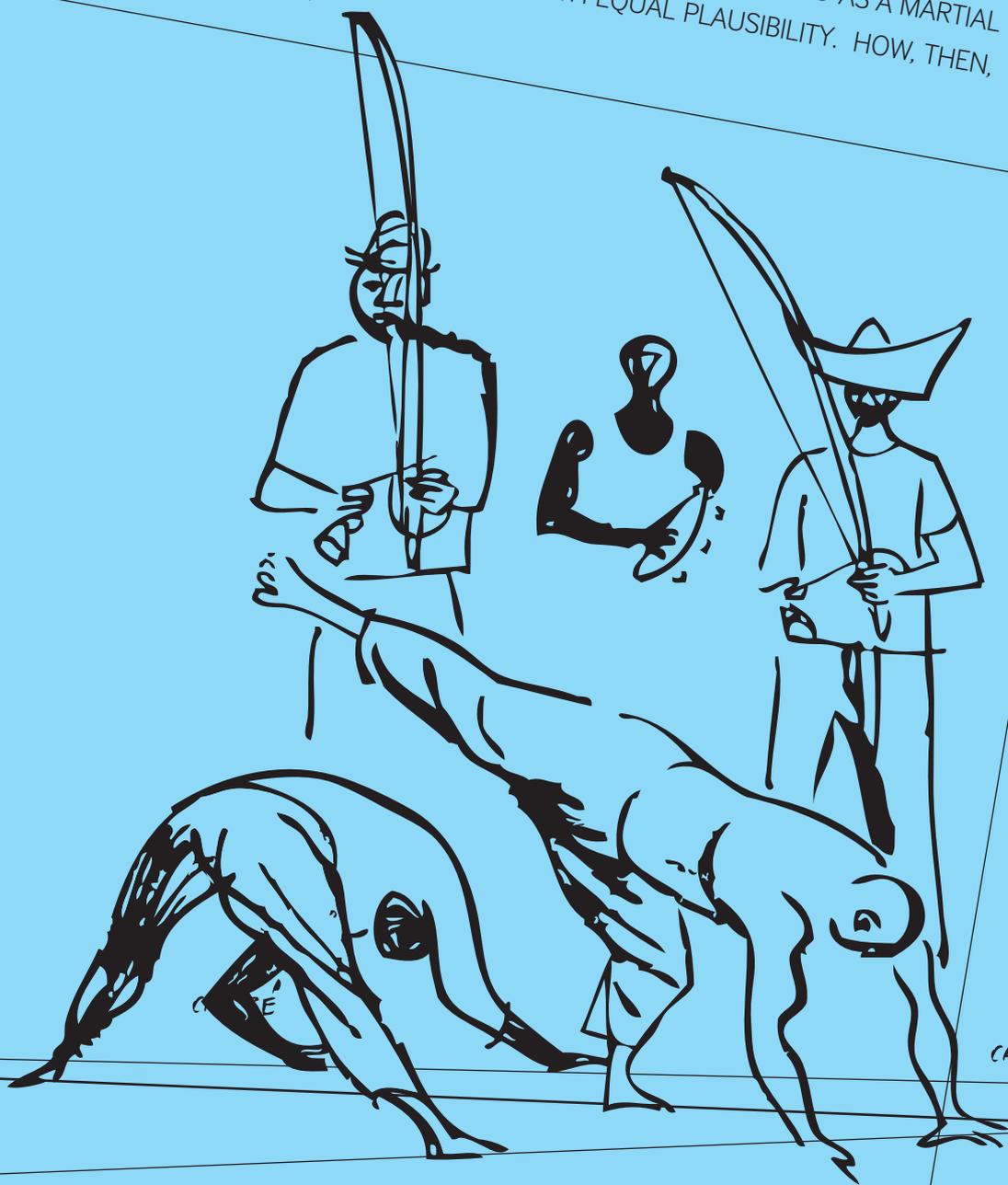


MYTHICAL-RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF CAPOEIRA

PEDRO RODOLPHO JUNGERS ABIB

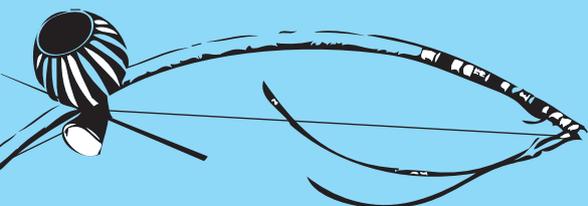
CAPOEIRA IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL AND MEANINGFUL EXPRESSIONS OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN CULTURE, AN EXPRESSION SO MULTIFACETED THAT IT IS UNDERSTOOD AS A MARTIAL STYLE OR STYLE OF DANCE, AS SPORT OR PASTIME, WITH EQUAL PLAUSIBILITY. HOW, THEN, ARE WE TO DEFINE SUCH A THING?



Among the myriad features of capoeira, none has given rise to greater curiosity, more debates, opinions, storytelling and handing down of legend through the oral tradition of popular culture than its mythical and religious side. This is one of the most important vehicles for the transmission of knowledge and wisdom.

We might take a cue from the late Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, who lived in Bahia until his death in 1980). He said that “*capoeira is what you eat and what you are!*” These words – by one of the main guardians of this form of expression – illustrate the fluid multiplicity of capoeira, as it changes and adapts, rebels and finds its place, creates and reproduces. In its range of uses this expression has served as self defense, even with lethal force. Today it finds its place in education, but it has always been a cry of freedom, reaffirming the culture of an oppressed people, a reflection of the sad legacy of four centuries of slavery in Brazil.

MYTHICAL-RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF CAPOEIRA



Mestre Bola Sete Collection

■ Mestre Pastinha

Among the myriad features of capoeira, none has given rise to greater curiosity, more debates, opinions, storytelling and handing down of legend through the oral tradition of popular culture than its mythical and religious side. This is one of the most important vehicles for the transmission of knowledge and wisdom.

In the lore and legend of capoeira and its masters, by far the most vivid and representative image is that of Besouro Mangangá, whose given name was Manoel Henrique Pereira. To this day many doubt he ever existed. Some – like the late Mestre Cobra Verde (Rafael França) – claim emphatically to have known and learned capoeira from Besouro. Only recently has proof of his existence turned up in the form of his death certificate, found at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia de Santo Amaro da Purificação.

The legend of Besouro lives on in the memory of the oldest residents of the Bay Area around Salvador. Many are the tales and stories they tell of his cunning in confrontations with the police, and of his courage and consummate fighting skills, which enabled him to take on and take down multiple opponents. But most of all they marvel at his reputation for “invulnerability” by dint of his initiation into the occult arts of African magic – arts that enabled him to “*turn into anything, a stump or an animal, or even to take off flying if hard pressed.*”

Besouro Mangangá (literally, Atlas Beetle), or Besouro Preto, or even Besouro Cordão de Ouro, as his sporting buddies used to call him, is the link to 19th-century capoeira, the traditions of slavery and the struggle for freedom, wars against rival mobs, straight razor fights and electioneering ward-heelers. This, claims researcher Antonio Liberac Pires,¹ was back in those carefree days of idle sport and legendary feats in tussles with the police. To this day at capoeira circles one can still hear Besouro praised in rhyme and legend. His bravery and perspicacity raised the bar for capoeiras ever since those bygone days. Admired throughout the land, and known for such acquired qualities as his “mystical invulnerability,” Besouro was a legend in his own time.

*Zum, zum, zum, Besouro Mangangá
Slapping round policemen with their military arms
Zum, zum, zum, Besouro Mangangá
Those who can't handle manding
never have a lucky charm...².*

Mestre João Pequeno de Pastinha (João Pereira dos Santos), Mestre Pastinha's most important follower – still going strong at almost 90 – claims Besouro was a cousin to his father, and that ever since he was a boy he had heard stories about his exploits. That was why he wanted to learn capoeira and be a tough guy like Besouro. To hear his father tell it, Besouro could hide no matter where he was, and folks would walk right past and not see him. João is also certain that his father, was also “prepared” through prayer and shared certain qualities with Besouro, namely, the ability to vanish: “*He'd be walking along a path, and when he saw someone he didn't want to be seen by, they just didn't see him.*”

Off in the world of literature, a character named Besouro tells his stories in a wonderful book by Marco Carvalho,³ “*Feijoada no Paraíso.*” He tells of having learned capoeira from Uncle (Tio) Alípio, who “...was already old when I met him, but seemed to have been that way forever. He was light on his feet, stepping softly like a cat.” Uncle Alípio was a former slave who, as a young man, kindled considerable romantic interest on the part of the sugarcane mill-owner's wife – and considerable anger on the part of his boss, who ordered him killed. But that never happened, “because his faith had been shaped by the beliefs of the *iorubá* people.” The character Besouro, as conjured back by Carvalho, goes on to say:

Uncle Alípio taught me a lot about everything. As eternally calm as an ancient country doctor, he was a black man, with eyes that could look deep into the eyes of meanness and spot the only way to get out of there alive. Capoeira is the art practiced by those who own their body and maybe those of others. Otherwise, the one that makes the first move, the sneaky one, that isn't and never was the bottle

foot, the dust devil, the unspoken, the despondent, no. Capoeira belongs to God. The world and most of its peoples have the power, the body has poetry, birds have beaks. Capoeira has axé. My father and my mestre taught me, and that is no small feat. But honey knows no flower and recognizes no bees. Those who taught me capoeira knew it.



■ Capoeira Practice - Illustration property of the Instituto Jair Moura holdings.

This magical and mysterious feature, known in the world of capoeira as *manding*, is crucial to a deeper understanding of this expression. As a noun, “*manding*” may refer, believes researcher Waldeloir Rego,⁴ to the Manding region of Western Africa, drained by the Niger, Senegal and Gambia rivers. Africans brought to Brazil believed there were many medicine men or shamans in that region. To the extent that capoeira's tradition is intertwined with magic, numerous powerful myths are still alive in its collective unconscious.

(1) *Bimba, Pastinha e Besouro Mangangá*. Antonio Liberac Pires. Tocantins: NEAB, 2002

(2) Popular ditty in the public domain.

(3) *Feijoada no paraíso: a saga de Besouro, o capoeira*. Marco Carvalho. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2002

(4) *Capoeira angola: ensaio sócio-etnográfico*. Waldeloir Rego. Salvador: Itapuã, 1968

Mestre Cobrinha Verde was one of the keenest admirers of “*manding arts*,” which he credited to teachings he received from Besouro and others initiated into this “secret knowledge” in Santo Amaro da Purificação, in the Salvador, Bahia, Bay Area.

Mestre Valdemar da Liberdade, another great teacher who is no longer with us, once told researcher Luiz Renato Vieira⁵ that the mestres of yesteryear “...were alive with *manding*, and could turn into leaves or turn into creatures. That was just the thing in case of trouble. Besouro was a great capoeirista, but entirely reliant on prayer.”

Mestre João Pequeno relates a story about Besouro’s death, in which his *manding* was broken:

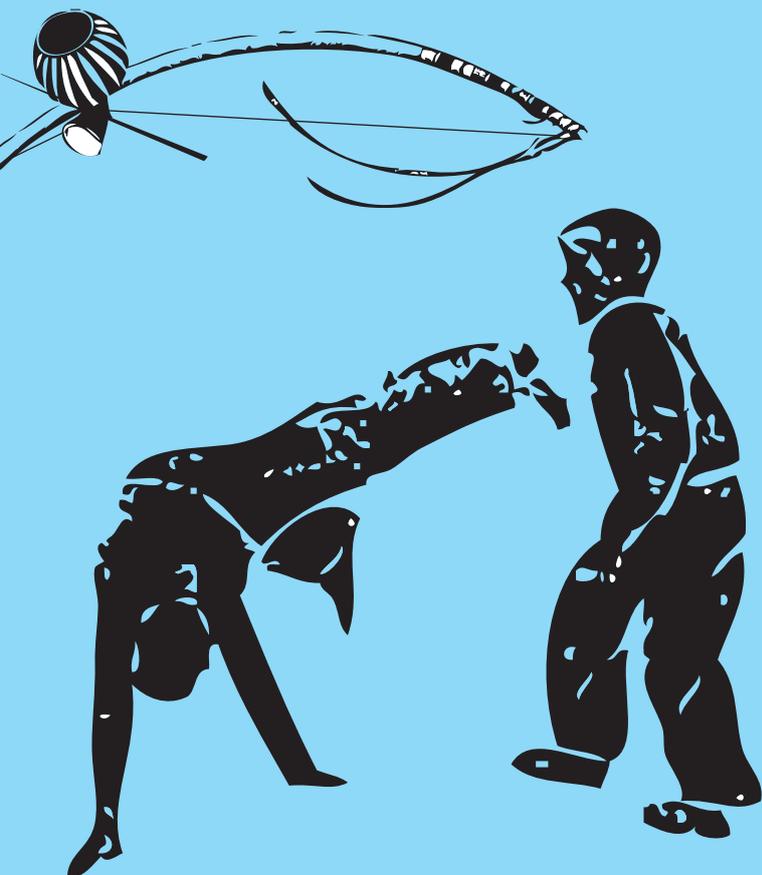
There is Manding in capoeira, also a lucky charm worn around the neck. Inside the charm there are prayers, prayers to prepare your body, prayers to turn aside the knife blade. But people of unclean body, who have sexual relations, are ill-prepared and vulnerable. That was how they managed to kill Besouro. He spent the night at a woman’s house, and on his way home the following day, he ducked under a barbed wire fence, and a barb cut his back, so he knew then he was weak (...). That was the day they killed Besouro, with a knife hardened out of tucum, which is a type of palm tree.

João Pequeno likewise recounts that he had his first capoeira lesson from a black teacher named Juvêncio, a blacksmith by trade. This was when he still lived in Mata de São João, in the countryside of the state of Bahia. According to João Pequeno, Juvêncio was a longtime friend of Besouro’s, and so had lots of stories to tell.

Mestre Cobrinha Verde was one of the keenest admirers of “*manding arts*,” which he credited to teachings he received from Besouro and others initiated into this “secret knowledge” in Santo Amaro da Purificação, in the Salvador, Bahia, Bay Area. He relates that these teachings helped him out of many tight spots in his wanderings and adventures, notably, when he traveled with armed bands, crisscrossing the hinterlands of northeastern Brazil.

The scapular I wore had seven pages with prayers to St. Agnes, to Saint Andrew, to Seven Chapels. When I took it off, I placed it on a clean plate, where it kept jumping, for it was alive. But there was some problem, for it disappeared and I never found it. There was something I did wrong, and it left and disappeared. When I joined up with the Horácio de Matos outfit at age 17, I already had that scapular. It got me out of a lot of jams. It was given to me by an African and, to this day, when I speak of him, it makes my eyes well up with tears. He called himself Uncle Pascoal.⁶

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(5) *O jogo da capoeira: cultura popular no Brasil*. Luiz Renato Vieira. Rio de Janeiro: Sprint, 1998.

(6) *Capoeiras e Mandingas*. Cobrinha Verde/Marcelino dos Santos. Salvador: A Rasteira, 1991

Cobrinha Verde described himself as Catholic, but he did not pass up African religious traditions to “make himself invulnerable” for protection from his enemies “in this world and the next.” Here is one of the prayers he said:

*Help me St. Sylvester
And the 27 Angels by the shirt you wear
Just as you tamed
The hearts of three lions
Atop the hill, pierced through hand and foot
Tame them, forgotten below my foot
Tamer than white wax
If they have eyes, they will not see me
If they have mouths, they will not address me
If they pay for my head, they will not have me
If they carry a knife for me
It will bend as Our Lady bent the rainbow
A club aimed at me will be broken
As Our Lady broke twigs to boil milk
For her Blessed Son
If a firearm is pointed at me
Water will run out its barrel, blood off its trigger
Just as Our Lady
Shed tears for her Blessed Son
Amen.⁷*

Statements by the earliest capoeiras show manding to be one of the building blocks of the form. Within the context of capoeira, the term manding describes the practitioner’s *savoir-faire*, with his feints and fake moves to mislead his adversary – but it also describes something sacred, a connection between the capoeirista and the mysteries of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Some mestres see *mandinga* as one of the distinguishing features that differentiate capoeira angola from capoeira regional. They believe that capoeira regional has distanced itself from the mythical and religious aspects that, with few exceptions, are part of African tradition. The result is that each has its own aesthetics of style, its own symbolism, with greater value placed on objectivity, technique, and direct confrontation, rather than subjectivity, sly strategy, and dissembling. These latter qualities more closely approximate the *mandinga* in capoeira angola. This is not to say that these features are entirely absent among capoeira regional practitioners, only that they are present to a lesser degree.

Mestre Eletricista (Edílson Manoel de Jesus) says that “*mandinga is not something you are taught... but something you learn.*” In this he was referring to the individual path each capoeira student must traverse to develop the “*mandinga arts.*” It is a quasi-religious initiation procedure, for which the reference is invariably “*ancestors who handed this down to us,*” concludes Eletricista.

Two capoeiristas hunker down at the foot of the berimbau, ready to begin their bout. This is a very special mo-



■ João Pequeno and João Grande ready to begin a bout (1968) - Photo: Jair Moura

ment in the capoeira angola circle, for according to the tradition of Mestre Pastinha, practice will begin and end with the same two players. There is time for each player to size up his partner, to try to figure out his game, and to position himself carefully to “make his move” at just the right moment. To be considered a *mandingueiro* the player has to “set up” the other, that is, watch and wait patiently for that careless moment in which to drive home a telling blow.

As the point of entry and exit in capoeira angola circle practice, the foot of the berimbau is that sacred place – at which beginning and end, past and present, heaven and earth, good and evil, life and death – all come together. Death is always a latent possibility. Every capoeirista feels its presence as he squats at the foot of the berimbau. The heart beats faster, breathing is deeper, and the eyes lock on to those of his opponent – possibly his executioner. That is why some capoeiristas cross themselves at the foot of the berimbau. There, *mandinga* often takes the form of the sign of the cross, other times it is in the “patterns” the capoeira traces on the ground with his hands. The origins of this practice among the old “*angoleiros*” are lost in the mists of time. It may even be a petition – through purposeful gestures with hands and body, to the saints or spirit *orixás* for protection – addressed even during the singing of the litany. Ancestral sounds echo forth from the berimbau, asking our forebears for protection. The musical bow was used in Africa to communicate with the dead. Only then do the two shake hands... and the bout may now commence.

Another very characteristic feature of capoeira angola, and one which includes elements of *mandinga*, is the angola ritual break or “*chamada.*” This is an interruption in the course of the bout. The *chamada* is a hiatus in the

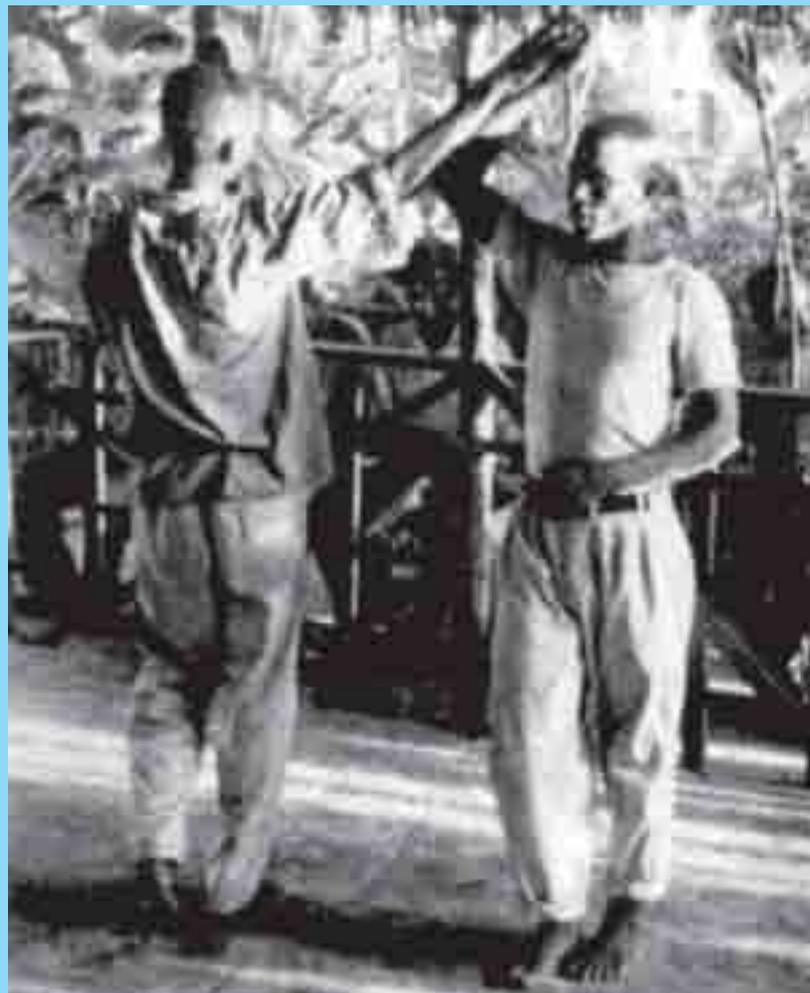
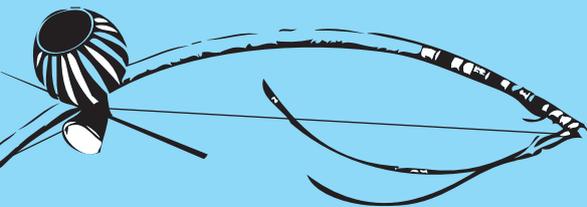
(7) *Capoeiras e Mandingas*. Cobrinha Verde/Marcelino dos Santos. Salvador: A Rasteira, 1991

Ancestral sounds echo forth from the berimbau, asking our forebears for protection. The musical bow was used in Africa to communicate with the dead. Only then do the two shake hands... and the bout may now commence.

succession of attack and defense moves, and includes the ginga pattern. One player breaks off the ongoing bout and freezes, observing the other. The partner then approaches, slowly and carefully – for there is a chance of being surprised by an unexpected attack move – until he is able to tag the player “calling” the passage. What follows then are synchronized motions to-and-fro, much like dancing. The tension between the two contestants is palpable, for at any time one might try some kind of “meanness,” like striking or tripping the other. The break is over the moment the player who “called” it undertakes to resume normal play, and signifies his intent to the partner by characteristic gestures. The bout is then resumed.

During this play-acting which comprises the angola passage, *mandinga* comes out in the way each player deals with the situation, in his cunning, craftiness and ability to dissemble and thereby mask his true intentions. Apprehension clings to the two capoeiristas during a *chamada*, when a certain air of mystery envelops the capoeira angola circle. Anything can happen in a *chamada*. Both capoeiristas must be on their guard against potential surprises, which are by no means uncommon in these situations.

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An angola passage or “*chamada*” in progress
Photograph: Instituto Jair Moura holdings

You must be alert and on guard at all times, on the lookout for all types of ambush, with the utmost concentration. So go the teachings of manding, whereby a savvy old monkey will never reach for the bait inside a coconut trap. (...) The secret of the stratagem lies inside the crafty device itself, deep within its singular mystery. Just as there is martyrdom in the seven wounds of Christ, so, my friend, have abiding faith in what you possess, and be leery even of your shadow... with sympathy, discipline and light within your soul.⁸

Analyzing the *mandinga* in capoeira means much more than identifying a few features of the circle ritual, or the stylized gestures and discourse of the participants. It means to go after a deeper understanding of patterns of behavior adopted by some of the *angoleiros*. These may be taken as teachings assimilated early in capoeira circle practice, teachings which, according to Mestre Moraes (Pedro Moraes), grow afterward into the daily lives of these individuals, and find their expression in the way they relate to the world.

There are ways of doing things, beliefs, superstitions and habits observable primarily among capoeira angola practitioners living throughout the Bay Area around Salvador, Bahia. These are quite specific features peculiar to a certain type of person who, in social interactions, is different precisely for having cultivated – through experience in capoeira angola – a style of behavior based on another type of logic, distinct from the rationality prevalent in modern societies, and expressed in the way one relates to the reality in which one lives. Typically, these are people who cultivate a kind of attention, a sagacity, a spiritual presence or even a sixth sense – features, in any case, quite different from what is considered standard behavior in contemporary urban societies.

This “other logic” is related to the mythical and religious aspects arising from Afro-Brazilian culture – aspects expressed, since time immemorial, through capoeira, and in a number of other ways.

The renowned Mestre Noronha (Daniel Coutinho), who lived through the early decades of the 20th century in the thick of Bahia’s capoeira and hepcat culture, bequeathed us a valuable legacy in his manuscripts, which bring to life many features of the capoeira culture of those days, and is a very important reference for historians seeking to reconstruct those raucous and tumultuous times. In one passage, faithfully transcribed from the original, he says:

Me and my colleagues in the same art, capoeira, which nowadays is in society and all over the world because it is a very valuable self-defense, that is, it’s treacherous mandinga to deal with any kind of rough stuff that turns up, which is sufficient for now because if it isn’t, then quit and let it go for another time, for there will al-

ways be another time because them that gets beat up never forgets and them that wins don’t ever remember, and therein lies the sly cunning of the capoeirista (p. 18).⁹

Besouro Mangangá had so much *mandinga* that, according to Mestre Bimba (Manoel dos Reis Machado), the originator of capoeira regional, “he could jump into a back flip and land with his feet back in his sandals.”¹⁰ Bezouro, along with other ancient capoeira artists such as Mestre Noronha, Pastinha, Cobrinha Verde and several others, were the legendary “*mandingueiros*” who still people the thoughts of residents of Salvador and the surrounding Bay Area, and whose influence on capoeira today goes way beyond the virtuous “qualities” they boasted in being tough guys and rowdies.

This magical atmosphere which surrounds the universe of capoeira, though it springs from the popular imagination, does indeed express the enormity of the field of possible meanings of this Afro-Brazilian expression as it relates to what is “sacred,” and says a lot about other traditions and expressions endemic to Brazil’s popular culture. To the simple people of our country this sacred dimension has an especially deep and profound meaning, which affects their beliefs, lifestyles, dreams and struggles, their victories and their defeats.



(8) *Maior é a capoeira, pequeno sou eu*. José Umberto. Revista da Bahia, No. 33 – Salvador: Fundação Cultural do Estado da Bahia, 1999

(9) *O ABC da capoeira angola: manuscritos do mestre Noronha*. Frederico Abreu. Brasília. DEFER, 1993 (original spirit imitated by translator).

(10) *Mestre Bimba: corpo de mandinga*. Muniz Sodré Rio de Janeiro: Manati, 2002 (p.36)

To the simple people of our country this sacred dimension has an especially deep and profound meaning, which affects their beliefs, lifestyles, dreams and struggles, their victories and their defeats.

Today's capoeiristas, whether they realize it or not, have inherited all of this ancestral baggage that capoeira carries in its soul, and cannot keep aloof from the feelings and meanings bound up with the process of cultural identification which every capoeira initiate goes through. These initiates develop different attitudes and end up adopting other ways of relating to the world, of dealing with danger and adversity, with the unknown or the unexpected.

Capoeira, as practiced in recent years, has been reduced to a consumer product. Tourists gather around to marvel at its backflips and enjoy a spectacle increasingly like "show business," and less and less recognizable for its more traditional features, its ritual content, and its ancestral *mandinga* heritage.

Yet by no means are these trends without offsets and opposition. Even now, all over the world, big changes are taking place, all of them clearly affirming the historical legacy of capoeira, with reverence for its early development and traditional forms. All of this is raising up and adding value to the form while clothing in new dignity this expression born of the creativity, beliefs, joy and suffering of an entire population.

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MYTHICAL-RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF CAPOEIRA

