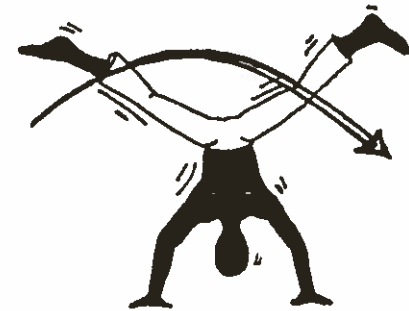


The Little Capoeira Book



Nestor Capoeira

translated by
Alex Ladd



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introducing capoeira to Europe, where he first taught in 1971. Through Nestor's eyes we can get a sense of the historical perspective of capoeira as well as recent trends.

Hopefully, this book will help to inspire a new generation of capoeiristas in this country. For those who doubt that this art form can be transplanted to American soil, it is necessary only to see top American capoeiristas in action. They have internalized the capoeira vocabulary and philosophy, and have achieved the ultimate compliment when Brazilian capoeiristas mistake them for one of their own. Their mastery is achieved through incredible hard work and dedication. I hope that this book will play a part in helping to spawn more capoeiristas like them.

—Alex Ladd (a.k.a. Graveto)

Alex Ladd was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1964. He began studying capoeira in 1986 with Mestre Jelon Vieira and later studied with Mestra Edna Lima. He currently resides in New Jersey, where he works as a free-lance writer and translator.

PREFACE

In 1971, while I was teaching capoeira at the London School of Contemporary Dance, I wrote a little manual and photocopied it for my students. I felt they needed some information on the history and philosophy of capoeira in order to understand what the *jogo* (game) they were learning in my classes was all about.

Those pages were the beginning of something that has grown in the last twenty-five years, which today is part of my relationship with capoeira and the capoeira world: I have since published three books on the subject in Brazil and now I am happy to see my first book translated into English and published in the United States.

Of course, during all of this time a lot of new research and information has been brought out, and many of my insights on the history of capoeira have changed. I have also grown a bit older and more experienced in the game—of life and of capoeira—and have had the chance to strengthen my links with players and *mestres* older than myself, capoeiristas I had admired when young and whom I now call my friends. These friendships brought with them a richness of information—philosophical knowledge of the roots and the ritual of the game—as well as shared experiences which spanned many years. This, of course, deepened my understanding of what capoeira is all about. I am happy to say that this new material is present in this first English edition, and I hope it can transmit this information that has enriched my vision of capoeira.

So my purpose in this “little book” is twofold:

1) to inform the reader about capoeira, its history, philosophy, music, ritual, myth and significance; and

2) to provide a practical method of teaching and learning that will properly introduce the beginner from a different culture to the capoeira game.

Capoeira has enriched my life, has opened many doors and given me unexpected opportunities in these last thirty years. I have observed that I am not the only one who has benefited from it, and I hope that the reader will shortly join our *roda* (circle).

—Nestor Capoeira

THE HISTORY

*Camará, donde é que vens, camará;
camará, donde é que vens, camará?*

Comrade, from whence do you come, comrade;
comrade, from whence do you come, comrade?



INTRODUCTION

In 1500 the Portuguese, led by explorer Pedro Alves Cabral, arrived in Brazil.

One of the first measures taken by the new arrivals was the subjugation of the local population—the Brazilian Indians—in order to furnish the Portuguese with slave labor.

The experience with the aborigines was a failure—the Indians quickly died in captivity or fled to their nearby homes. The Portuguese then began to import slave labor from Africa. On the other side of the Atlantic, free men and women were captured, loaded onto ghastly slave ships and sent on a nightmarish voyage that for most would end in perpetual bondage.

The Africans first arrived by the hundreds and later by the thousands. They brought with them their culture—vibrant and different from the European one—a culture that was not stored away in books or museums but rather in the body, mind, heart and soul; a culture that was transmitted from father to son, from the initiate to the novice throughout the generations.

There was *candomblé*, a religion; the *berimbau*, a musical instrument; *vatapá*, a food; and so many other things—in short, a way of life. This book makes reference to a small part of that vast whole—the game of capoeira.

ORIGINS

The origins of capoeira—whether African or Brazilian—are cause for controversy to this day; different and opposing theories have been created to explain how it all began. Unfortunately, the early days of capoeira are shrouded in mystery, since few documents exist from that era regarding capoeira, and research on the matter is still in its initial stages.

But so that we may better understand the subject, let us also embark on a terrible voyage similar to that of the slave ships as they carried their human cargo to a life of slavery.

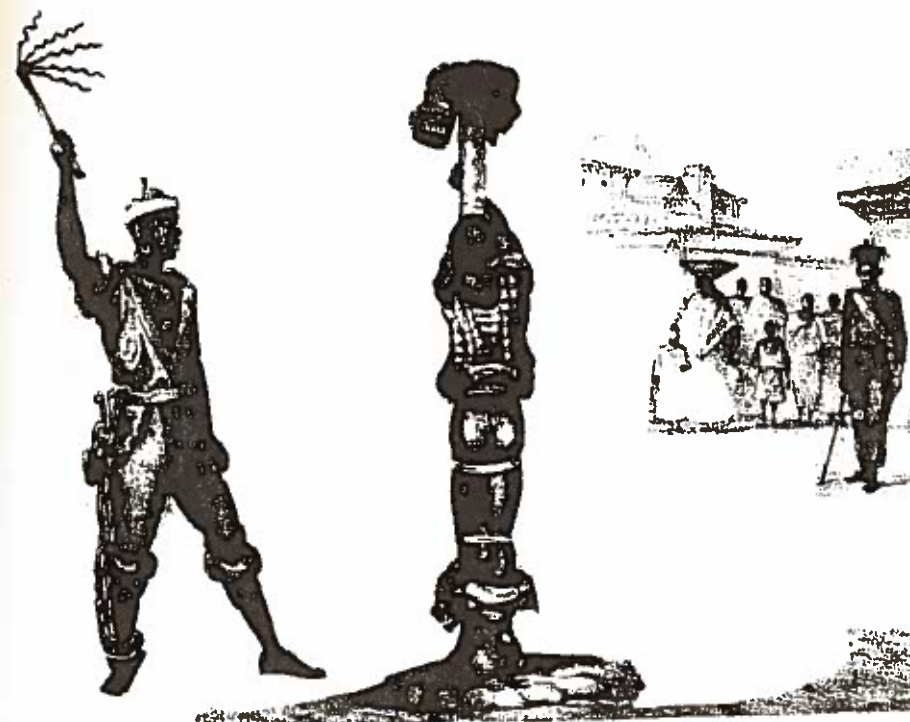
Let us imagine the landing of a flying saucer arriving from a distant planet. Its crew members carry terrible and unknown weapons. A great number of people, among general chaos and bloodshed, are captured.

After the frightful voyage, we arrive at our new home. There we are sold into slavery, and after the first days of arduous work we are taken to rest in the common slave quarters. We get to know our companions in this calamity: an American guitar player, an English boxer, a Brazilian samba percussionist, a Chinese tai-chi practitioner, and an African *swat* player—among many others.

Time goes by, and during the rare moments of leisure we begin to absorb each other's culture. Our children, and the children of our children, are born and raised in this environment of heterogeneous cultures and enslavement. Let us imagine that gradually, over several decades, a new form of cultural expression is born—a dance-fight, a game that is a mixture of boxing, tai-chi, samba, American music and the *swat*.

Now we have an idea of how capoeira was born and what its origins were: a synthesis of dances, fights and musical instruments from different cultures, from different African regions. It is a synthesis created on Brazilian soil, probably in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, under the regime of slavery primarily during the nineteenth century.⁵

5. Capoeira developed in other parts of Brazil also, particularly in Rio de Janeiro and in Recife, where strong capoeira traditions could be found in the nineteenth century. In those cities capoeira maintained only its original fighting aspect and did not develop the synthesis between ritual and fight found in Bahia. Later, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the capoeira traditions in these two cities were extinguished by the police.



Condemned to a whipping in the public square. Debret, 1834

DURING SLAVERY

Starting around 1814, capoeira and other forms of African cultural expression suffered repression and were prohibited in some places by the slave masters and overseers.

Up until that date, forms of African cultural expression were permitted and sometimes even encouraged, not only as a safety gauge against the internal pressures created by slavery but also to bring out the differences between various African groups, in a spirit of “divide and conquer.”

But with the arrival in Brazil in 1808 of the Portuguese king Dom João VI and his court, who were fleeing Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Portugal, things changed: The newcomers understood the necessity of destroying a people's culture in order to



Jogar capoeira or danse de la guerre (Rugendas, 1824)

dominate them, and capoeira began to be persecuted in a process which would culminate with its being outlawed in 1892.

Why was capoeira suppressed? The motives were many:

- It gave the Africans a sense of nationality.
- It developed self-confidence in individual capoeira practitioners.
- It created small, cohesive groups.
- It created dangerous and agile fighters.
- Sometimes the slaves would injure themselves during the capoeira game, which was not desirable from an economic point of view.

The masters and the overseers were probably not as conscious as the king and the intellectuals of his court of all of these motives,

but intuitively—by that intuition which is inherent in any dominant class—they knew that something did not “smell right.”

How was capoeira practiced, then?

- In a violent form in Rio de Janeiro and Recife.
- As a ritual-dance-fight-game in Bahia, where capoeira progressively absorbed other African elements.
- Sometimes in hiding, and in other places openly, in defiance of laws designed to abolish it.

Capoeira at that time had little in common with the capoeira that is practiced today or during the last one hundred years.

Take, for example, a description by the German artist Rugendas. His drawings of what he called “*Capüera, danse de la guerre*” (“Capoeira, war dance”) and his written description of what he witnessed (*Voyage Picturesque et Historique dans le Bresil*, Engelman & Co., Paris 1824) are some of the first records we have of capoeira:⁶

The Negroes have yet another war-like past-time, which is much more violent—capoeira: two champions throw themselves at each other, trying to strike their heads at the chest of the adversary whom they are trying to knock over. The attack is avoided with leaps to the sides and with stationary maneuvers which are equally as skillful, but in launching themselves at each other it so happens that they strike their heads together with great force, and it is not rare that the game degenerates into a fight, causing knives to be brought into the picture, and bloodying the sport.

Absent from Rugendas’ description are the acrobatic jumps, the ground movements, the leg blows, and the musical instrument called the *berimbau*, which had not yet been incorporated into the

6. Confirming this version of a more violent early capoeira, we have a letter from 1821, from the Military Commission of Rio de Janeiro to the War Ministry, complaining of “capoeira Negroes arrested by the military school for disorderly conduct.” The letter recommends public punishment as a deterrent, and states that “there have been six deaths attributed to the before-mentioned capoeiras as well as several knife injuries.”

game of capoeira. The *berimbau* is a one-stringed instrument with a gourd attached; its simplicity belies the range of sound an experienced player can summon from it. Ironically, today it is often considered indispensable and indeed dictates the rhythm and nature of the game—slower or faster, more combative or playful, treacherous or harmonious, etc.

In those days, capoeira was accompanied only by the *atabaque* (similar to the conga drum), hand-clapping and singing, as shown in Rugendas' drawing.

As time went by, this early capoeira described by Rugendas evolved and changed, partly through the mere passage of time—everything changes with time—and partly through the influence of other forms of fighting and dance coming from Africa, such as this dance described in a passage by Curt Sachs in *World History of Dance*:

Two dancers and a singer take their places in the center of the circle. One sings praises to the old chiefs and maybe also to his favorite bull, and marks the rhythm with hand claps, while the other two dancers execute acrobatic moves and flips.



Musicians and acrobat during an African burial in Brazil (Debret 1834).

It must be stressed that there are many other theories attempting to explain the origins of capoeira.

According to one prevalent theory, capoeira was a fight that was disguised as a dance so that it could be practiced unbeknownst to the white slave owners. This seems unlikely because, around 1814, when African culture began to be repressed, other forms of African dancing suffered prohibition along with capoeira, so there was no sense in disguising capoeira as a dance.

Another theory says that the Mucupes in the South of Angola had an initiation ritual (*efundula*) for when girls became women, on which occasion the young warriors engaged in the *N'golo*, or "dance of the zebras," a warrior's fight-dance. According to this theory, the *N'golo* was capoeira itself. This theory was presented by Câmara Cascudo (*Folclore do Brasil*, 1967), but one year later Walde-loir Rego (*Capoeira Angola*, Editora Itapoan, Salvador, 1968) warned that this "strange theory" should be looked upon with reserve until it was properly proven (something that never happened). If the *N'Golo* did exist, it would seem that it was at best one of several dances that contributed to the creation of early capoeira.

Other theories mix Zumbi, the legendary leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares (a community made up of those who managed to flee from slavery) with the origins of capoeira, without any reliable information on the matter.

All of these theories are extremely important when we try to understand the myth that surrounds capoeira, but they clearly cannot be accepted as historical fact according to the data and information that we presently have. Perhaps with further research the theory that we have proposed here, i.e., capoeira as a mix of various African dances and fights that occurred in Brazil, primarily in the 19th century, will also be outdated in future years.⁷

7. We say that the mixture of the capoeira described by Rugendas (1824) with other African elements happened in the nineteenth century, but when this original capoeira began to be practiced we do not know.

THE FREEING OF THE SLAVES

With the signing of the Golden Law in 1888, which abolished slavery, the newly freed blacks did not find a place for themselves within the existing socio-economic order. The capoeirista, with his fighting skills, self-confidence, and individuality, quickly descended into criminality—and capoeira along with him.

In Rio de Janeiro, where capoeira had developed exclusively as a form of fighting, criminal gangs were created that terrorized the population. Soon thereafter, during the transition from the Brazilian Empire to the Brazilian Republic in 1890, these gangs were used by both monarchists and republicans to exert pressure on and break up the rallies of their adversaries. The club, the dagger and the switchblade were used to complement the damage done by such capoeira moves as the *rabo de arraia* and the *rasteira*.

In Bahia, on the other hand, capoeira continued to develop into a ritual-dance-fight-game, and the *berimbau* began to be an indispensable instrument used to command the *rodas*, which always



A capoeirista delivers a deadly blow with his razorblade (Kalixto, 1906).

took place in hidden locales since the practice of capoeira in this era had already been outlawed by the first constitution of the Brazilian Republic (1892).

We now arrive at the year 1900.

In Rio, the capoeirista was a *malandro* (a rogue) and a criminal—whether he be white, mulatto or black—expert in the use of kicks (*golpes*), sweeps (*rasteiras*) and head-butts (*cabeçadas*), as well as in the use of blade weapons. In Recife, capoeira became associated with the city's principal music bands. During carnival time, tough capoeira fighters would lead the bands through the streets of that city, and wherever two bands would meet, fighting and bloodshed would usually ensue.

In turn-of-the-century Bahia, the capoeira⁸ was also often seen as a criminal. But the players and the game exhibited all of the traits that still characterize it to this day.

The persecution and the confrontations with the police continued. The art form was slowly extinguished in Rio and Recife, leaving capoeira only in Bahia. It was during this period that legendary figures—feared players, *de corpo fechado*⁹ such as Besouro Cordão-de-Ouro in Bahia, Nascimento Grande in Recife and Manduca da Praia in Rio, who are celebrated to this day in capoeira verses—made their appearances.

It is said that Besouro lived in Santo Amaro da Purificação in the State of Bahia, and that he was the teacher of another famous capoeirista by the name of Cobra Verde, whom I met in Bahia in the 1960s. Besouro did not like the police and was feared not only as a capoeira player but as an expert in the use of blade weapons, and also for having his *corpo fechado*. According to legend, an ambush was set up for him. It is said that he himself (who could not read)

8. *Capoeira* can be used to denote the art form or, as in this case, the practitioner of the art form (who can also be called a *capoeirista*).

9. *Corpo fechado* (closed body): A person who, through specific magic rituals, supposedly attains almost complete invulnerability in the face of various weapons.

carried the written message identifying him as the person to be killed, thinking that it was a message that would bring him work. Legend says he was killed with a special wooden dagger prepared during magic rituals in order to overcome his *corpo fechado*.

Of all the rogues who led the carnival bands through the streets of Recife, Nascimento Grande was one of the most feared. Some say that he was killed during the police persecution in the early 1900s, but others say he moved from Recife to Rio de Janeiro and died there of old age.

Manduca da Praia was of an earlier generation (1890s) and always dressed in an extremely elegant style. It is said that he owned a fish store and lived comfortably. He was also one of those who controlled elections in the area he lived in. He was said to have twenty-seven criminal cases against him (for assault, knifing, etc.) but was always absolved due to the influence of the politicians he worked for.

Later on, in the 1930s in Salvador, Mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado—1900–1974) opened the first capoeira academy (1932), a feat made possible by the nationalistic policies of Getulio Vargas, who wanted to promote capoeira as a Brazilian sport.¹⁰ From that moment on, Bimba began to teach capoeira in his *Centro de Cultura Física Regional Baiano*. In 1941, Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha—1889–1981) opened his *capoeira Angola* school. For the first time, capoeira began to be taught and practiced openly in a formal setting.

10. Although Bimba opened his school in 1932, the official recognition only came about in 1937, when it was technically registered. It must be noted that the Getulio Vargas government permitted the practice of capoeira, but only in enclosed areas that were registered with the police. Vargas believed that physical education could be used to instill a sense of discipline in children if taught at an early age. He thought that capoeira, if transformed into a “sport,” could help. In fact, much later, in 1955, he personally congratulated Mestre Bimba for turning capoeira into Brazil’s “national fight.”

BIMBA AND PASTINHA

The two central figures in capoeira in the twentieth century were undoubtedly Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha. In fact, these two figures are so important in the history of capoeira that they (and the legend that surrounds them) are the mythical ancestors of all capoeira players, and much of what we are or try to be is due to what these men were or represented.

Mestre Bimba was born Manoel dos Reis Machado in 1900. He was initiated in capoeira when he was twelve years old, in an area known today as Liberdade, in Salvador. His mestre was the African Bentinho, a captain of a maritime company in Bahia. Bimba opened a school at the age of eighteen, but it was only in the 1930s that he opened his first academy, where he started teaching what he called “the regional fight from Bahia,” eventually known as *Capoeira Regional*.

Bimba was a feared fighter who earned the nick-name “Três Pancadas” (or Three Hits) which, it was said, were the maximum number of blows that his adversaries could take from him. Nonetheless, Bimba espoused the *malandro* philosophy of “brain over brawn.” He was fond of saying, “*Quem aguenta tempestade é rochedo*,” (“Only cliffs face the tempest”), which meant that if you are faced by someone much stronger than you, the smart thing to do is to run; but if he were to run after you, then you could get him unexpectedly—a typical *malandro* attitude.

With the opening of Bimba’s academy, a new era in the history of capoeira began, as the game was taught to the children of the upper classes of Salvador.

Bimba introduced sweeps from *batuque*, a form of fighting in which



Mestre Bimba in his thirties

his father was proficient, and new *golpes ligados*, or connected blows. He also created a new teaching method based on eight sequences of predetermined moves and kicks for two players, and on the *cin-tura desprezada*—sequences of flips in which the capoeirista learns to always fall on his feet (see page 86). He essentially sacrificed much of the ritual and “game” aspects, as well as the slower rhythms, in favor of greater aggressiveness and fighting spirit.

All of this, added to the very important fact that the majority of his students belonged to another social class (meaning in turn that they possessed different backgrounds and values, and a different way of thinking than the traditional capoeirista, who belonged to the underprivileged classes deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian culture), contributed to the creation of a new style known as *Capoeira Regional*.

In the years following the opening of his academy, Bimba had great success. He and his pupils performed in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and other major cities of Brazil. But in the beginning of the 1970s, dissatisfied with the official institutions of Bahia that had never helped him, he decided to move to Goiana (near Brasília, the capital of Brazil). One year later, on February 5, 1974, he died in that city. Up until the last day of his life, he was active and extremely lucid. As a matter of fact, he planned to give an exhibition in a club that same afternoon. Although he had asked to be buried in Goiana, some of his former pupils got together and brought his body back to Salvador, where he had taught and practiced capoeira all of his life.

Many other individuals created and began to teach new forms of capoeira, but they did not possess Bimba’s breadth of knowledge nor his personality, and these novelties disappeared just as quickly as they appeared.

With the advent of the *Regional* style, the traditional capoeira style became known as *Capoeira Angola*. During the time when the *Regional* and *Senzala* styles eclipsed *Capoeira Angola*, Pastinha and his group were practically the only ones that still preserved the traditional style, although some other groups were still active.

Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, Mestre Pastinha, was born in 1889.

He is said to have learned capoeira from an African from Angola named Benedito, who took the young Pastinha under his wing after witnessing him being repeatedly beaten up by an older boy. In spite of his small stature, at the age of sixteen Pastinha became a sort of a bouncer for a gambling house in a tough part of town. He opened his first academy a few years after Bimba’s opened and, due to his charisma and leadership as well as his friendly way of dealing with others, he was able to attract a devoted group of pupils and capoeiristas that made his academy famous as a gathering point for artists and intellectuals who wanted to see the traditional *Capoeira Angola*.

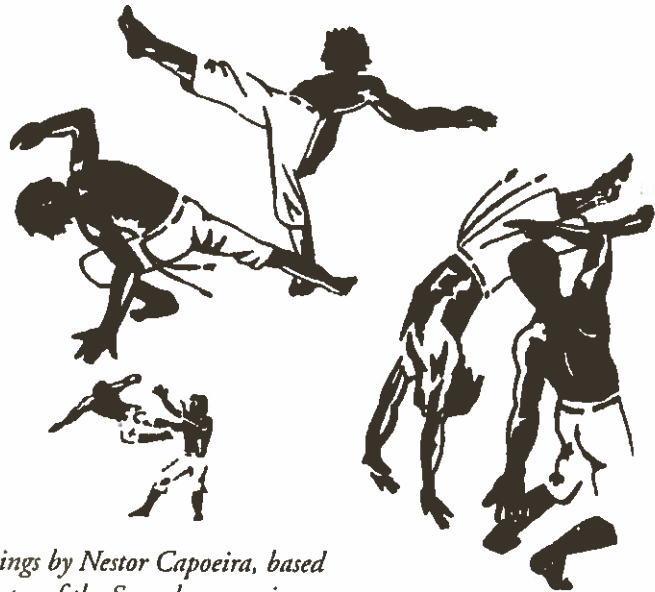
Pastinha became known as the “Philosopher of capoeira” because of his use of many aphorisms. One his favorites was “*Capoeira é para homen, menino e mulher, só não aprende quem não quiser.*” (“Capoeira is for men, women and children; the only ones who don’t learn it are those who don’t wish to.”) Like Bimba, he was well versed in the philosophy of *malandragem*, and would tell of how he would carry a small sickle sharpened on both edges in his pocket. “If it had a third edge I would sharpen that one too, for those who wished to do me harm,” he was fond of saying.¹¹

Unfortunately, government authorities, under the pretext of reforming the Largo do Pelourinho, where he had had his academy, confiscated his class space. Although they promised a new one, they never came through on that promise. The final years of his life were sad: blind and almost abandoned, he lived in a little room until his death in 1981 at the age of ninety-two. He left many pupils, two of the most famous being Mestre João Grande (now teaching in New York) and Mestre João Pequeno.

THE RECENT YEARS

In the 1940s Bahian capoeiristas began to immigrate to Rio, and later to São Paulo and other cities. Nonetheless, until the 1960s,

11. As we will see later, Pastinha also spoke of how this blade could be attached to the end of a *berimbau*.



Drawings by Nestor Capoeira, based on photos of the Senzala group in 1970. Top: Gato and Mosquito; bottom left: Rafael and Mosquito; bottom right: Peixinho and Mosquito.

the uncontested mecca for Brazilian capoeiristas continued to be Salvador and the state of Bahia.

In the beginning of the 1960s, capoeira students from Rio's middle class, after studying with Mestre Bimba in Salvador, returned to Rio and began a self-taught apprenticeship. Ten years later, the *Senzala* school reached its apex with the capoeira *rodas* in the neighborhood of Cosme Velho and became the most famous group in Brazil, practicing and teaching a new *Regional-Senzala* style that would influence capoeira players all over the country.

At the same time, in São Paulo there was also a proliferation of capoeira.¹² Intensive warm-ups and systematic practice of blows

12. Today that giant metropolis has one of the largest concentration of capoeira academies in Brazil. By one estimate, there are as many as 1,200 academies in the state of São Paulo, many of them concentrated in the capital city.

were added to Bimba's methods. Soon, in Rio as well as in São Paulo, a new cord system inspired by the Asian martial arts was adopted as a means of attracting more students by giving a "clean" image of a new and organized capoeira.

For a while there was even an attempt to create capoeira competitions with championships, judges and rules. Although, at times during the 1970s, it seemed as if capoeira were going to lose its ritualistic, philosophical and game aspects, and turn itself into another among many competitive martial arts, after a few years the championships stopped attracting many of the best capoeiristas. Although such competitions still exist today, they are not generally considered to have any real significance in the capoeira world.

CAPOEIRA IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

In the 1970s and 1980s, capoeira experienced great growth throughout Brazil and for the first time began to expand beyond Brazil's borders. Salvador lost its hegemony or, more accurately, began to share it with Rio and São Paulo due to the migration of its elite



Mestre Bimba at seventy years of age (drawing by Bodinho).

young capoeiristas to these two capital cities and the development of strong local capoeira groups there.

In Bahia, the era whose most celebrated elements were Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha came to an end at last.

These two masters and their contemporaries were succeeded by another generation in their sixties and seventies, such as the legendary Mestres Valdemar, Caiçaras, Canjiquinha, João Grande, João Pequeno, Gato, Paulo dos Anjos, Leopoldina, Suassuna, etc.—true connoisseurs and representatives of the capoeira

practiced by the previous generation.

For a while, though, it seemed that the rich and valuable capoeira which they had helped keep alive was rapidly disappearing. Their values, knowledge and philosophy often did not jibe with the new technological era and the new capoeira landscape in which they found themselves, an era in which the individual is alienated and television represents society's highest form of cultural expression — not to mention the drastic changes that occurred in Salvador in the last thirty years, which have to some extent transformed the mystical capital city into a center for consumerism and tourism.

For this reason, one could no longer find the traditional *roda* of Mestre Valdemar in the Liberdade neighborhood. Many of the other mestres, disgusted by this state of affairs, no longer taught, and only very rarely did they play. The mentality had changed; even in the street markets it was hard to see a good player performing.

On the other hand, parallel to this retreat of the traditional *Capoeira Angola* style and its old mestres, the new generation of *Capoeira Regional* teachers that had come from Brazil's middle class were having enormous success in terms of money, number of students, status and media support.

Although capoeira was beginning to experience unparalleled growth and acceptance in Brazilian society, some argued that something was being irrevocably lost along the way.

Muniz Sodre (a.k.a. Americano), a capoeirista from the old guard, warned against these changes in his article "A Brazilian Art of the Body." Capoeira, "as it was practiced by the old mestres from Bahia, was an anti-repressive exercise. To play was a manner of overthrowing the seriousness of the concept of art, established by a neurotic system known as culture."

He continued: "Capoeira today faces subtler and more powerful adversaries: tourism, which changes the ritual into show, and the pedagogical obsession which tries to make of the game and art a sport with rules and regulations."



6, de outubro de 1978 JORNAL DO BRASIL

Nestor Capoeira, herói do corpo fechado em *Cordão de Ouro*

"CORDÃO DE OURO"
CAPOEIRA E FANTASIA

Um espetáculo de capoeira, com o mestre Nestor Capoeira, herói do corpo fechado, em uma apresentação que mistura a tradição com a fantasia. O espetáculo será realizado no próximo dia 15, às 20h, no Teatro Municipal de Salvador. A entrada é gratuita. Informações: (71) 324-1111.

Article in *Jornal do Brasil* announcing the release in 1978 of *Cordão de Ouro*, a film starring Nestor Capoeira.

CAPOEIRA NOWADAYS – THE 1990S

After the creation of *Capoeira Regional* in Bahia in the 1930s by Mestre Bimba, and the great success of the Senzala group in Rio in the 1960s and '70s, which paralleled the creation of capoeira championships with judges and rules, it seemed that the traditional values of capoeira were seeing their final days. Although a few traditional *Angola* mestres kept on teaching, they were completely eclipsed by the new style that had its origins in Bimba's *Capoeira Regional*.

But unexpectedly, from approximately 1985 onwards, there has been a revival of the traditional *Capoeira Angola*. Fortunately, some

of the old mestres were still around, and returned to the capoeira scene with great strength, bringing back roots and values that had seemed completely lost.

Today, we are lucky to find a certain diversity that enriches the capoeira movement. Besides the *Regional/Senzala* style, which brought great technical development in certain kicks and other aspects, we can still find great *Angola* mestres who, along with their own highly developed technique and methods, have added to the deep knowledge of the ritual, music and philosophy of capoeira. And among the new generation of capoeira teachers, who are now around thirty-five years old, we find many of the best interested in both the *Regional/Senzala* style and the traditional *Capoeira Angola* style.



A game of Capoeira Angola during the famous roda of the late Mestre Valdemar (striped shirt).

◎ JOGO (THE GAME)

*Menino escuta esta toada;
o lance certo muitas vezes esta errado.
Na roda, quem já esta classificado
leva sempre o sorriso que desanuvia
o lábio, ou então um rosto
que é como uma charada.*

Hey, young man, listen to this song;
what seems right is often wrong.
In the *roda*, those in the know
always come ready with a smile
that parts their lips, or with an
expression which is but a riddle.

(“Menino escuta esta toada”—Nestor Capoeira)

THE MUSIC

My berimbau . . .

whosoever should hear it play,
their sorrow, the sorrow they feel, will disappear.

You shall create a soul that is always new,
you shall create a soul that is always new!

My berimbau . . .

but whosoever should hear it play,
if it be a maid, she will become engaged.

My berimbau,

he only brings happiness, my comrade,

Yê, é hora, é hora . . .

(*"Louvação do Berimbau,"* by Mestre Leopoldina)

MUSIC AND CAPOEIRA

The capoeira *roda* consists of the following major instruments: a *berimbau*, an *atabaque* and a *pandeiro*. It can also include other instruments which are often present but which are not indispensable for most *rodas*: the *reco-reco* and the *agô-gô* (cow-bell).¹³

THE BERIMBAU

There is much lore surrounding the *berimbau*:

- Mestre Pastinha tells how, in the old days, a small sickle sharpened on both sides would be attached to the end of the instrument in order to create a deadly weapon: "In the moment of truth it would cease to be a musical instrument and would turn into a hand sickle." Thus the instrument, like the game of capoeira itself, combined within it two antagonistic poles: music and death, dance and fight, beauty and violence.
- It is said that in certain parts of Africa it was forbidden for the young who cared for the livestock to play this instrument; it was thought that its sound would take the soul of the youth—which was still inexperienced—to the "land of no return."
- In Cuba, where it is known as *burumbumba*, it is used to communicate with the spirit of the dead ancestors (*eguns*) in ceremonies of necromancy (Fernando Ortiz, *Los*

13. The traditional Angola *roda* usually requires three berimbaus (high-tone, mid-tone and bass), and one or more *pandeiro*, plus the *atabaque*, the *reco-reco* and the *agô-gô*. However, depending on the *roda* and on the ritual followed by the local mestre, some will do without these last three instruments.

Instrumentos de la Musica Afro-Cubana, Dirección de Cultura del Ministerio de Educación, Havana, 1952).

- The *berimbau* was also used in many parts of Africa and Brazil during the nineteenth century to accompany chants, storytelling and poetry (Debret, *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil*, Firmin Didot Frères, Paris, 1834).

The *berimbau* creates the mood and dictates the rhythm and nature of the game taking place within the *roda*. According to the old mestres, "The *berimbau* teaches."

Along with the hand-clapping, the chants, the *pandeiro* and the *atabaque*, the *berimbau* influences the players' actions inside of the *roda*. Or, if you prefer, these attract forces and energies to the *roda* which vary according to the beat chosen.

The *berimbau* is made of a wooden bow, approximately seven palm-lengths long and three quarters to one inch in diameter.



Berimbau player (Debret 1834).

At its widest end, a small peg is carved on which to attach a steel wire. The other extremity is covered by a leather patch, which prevents the wire from penetrating and cracking the wood. Nowadays the wire is taken from the inner sides of old car tires.¹⁴

A dry, hollowed-out gourd, called a *cabaça* in Portuguese, serves as a percussive box to amplify the sound of the instrument. A wide circular opening is made where the stem of the fruit used to be, and on the opposite side there are two small perforations threaded by a ring of string which is used to fasten the gourd to the bow.

The *berimbau* is usually held in the left hand along with a stone, a coin or a metal washer (*vintém*), which produces one of two notes produced by the instrument, depending on whether or not it is touching the metal wire.

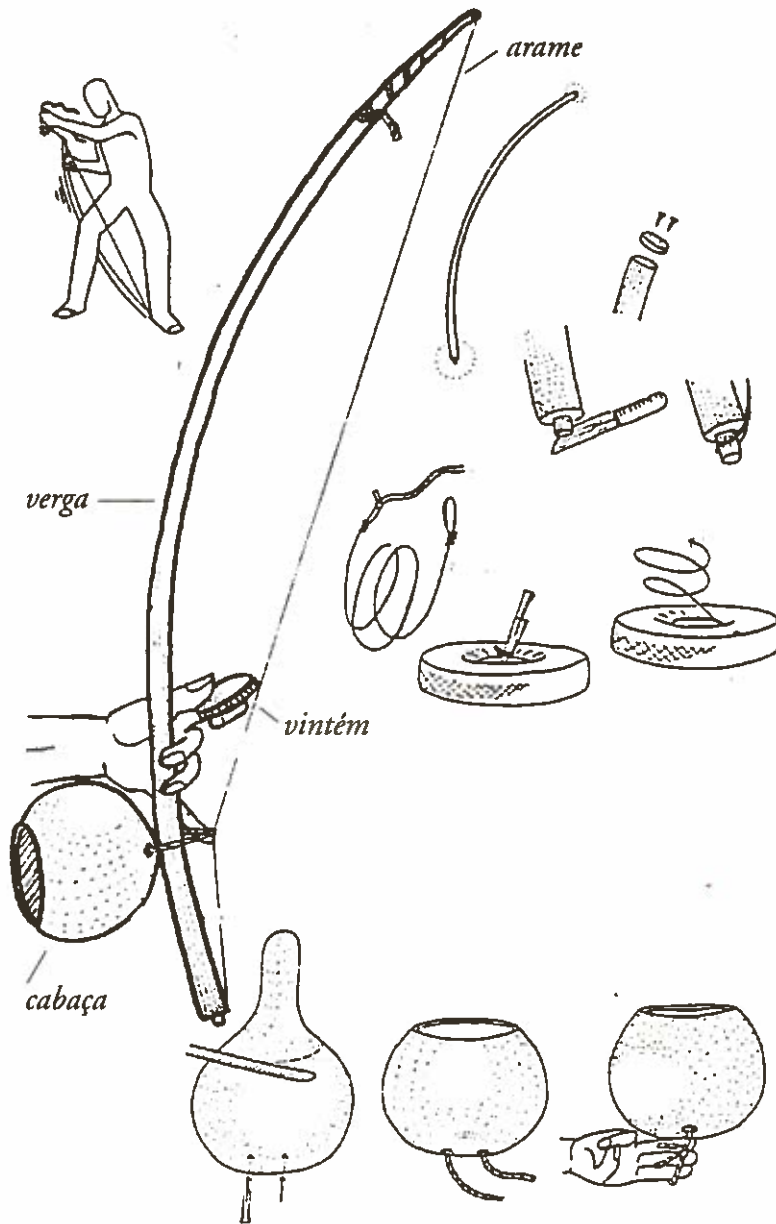
The sound of the *berimbau* is produced when the wire is struck by a wooden stick (*baqueta*) approximately twelve inches long, which is held in the right hand along with a small shaker (*caxixi*) made of woven straw. The sound of the dried beans or pebbles inside the *caxixi* enriches and adds texture to the *berimbau's* sound.

By either placing or removing the gourd on the abdomen, the player can obtain different modulations of the same basic notes. There are three types of *berimbaus*, and ideally all are present in the *roda*.¹⁵

- The *gunga*, which has the deepest sound, plays the role of the bass; it keeps the rhythm, and normally plays the basic theme of a certain beat without variations.
- The *berimbau médio*, or *de centro*, also known simply as the *berimbau*, plays over the basic rhythm of the *gunga*; it plays a

14. In the old days, animal entrails were used.

15. Mestre Bimba would generally use only one *berimbau* in the *roda*, and he did so in his LP record "*Curso de Capoeira Regional*." When he is singing and the chorus is answering, we see that he played his *berimbau* as the *médio* that it was (he plays the basic theme of the *São Bento Grande*, followed by the basic variation of that beat, again and again). But between songs he improvises as if his *berimbau* were a *violinha*.



The making of a berimbau. Wire is removed from the inside of a tire, and a gourd is cut in the fashion shown above, to serve as a percussive box which amplifies the sound of the instrument.

role similar to that of the rhythm guitar. For example, it can play the basic theme of a certain beat, then a basic variation on it, and then return to the basic theme, and so on.

- The *viola* or *violinha* is the *berimbau* that has the sharpest sound; it is responsible for the syncopation or the improvisation. The role that it plays is equivalent to the solos of a lead guitar.¹⁶

The richness and intricacy of the rhythms make up for whatever melodic limitations the *berimbau* might have—when it is in the hands of an experienced player, one would never suspect it has only two notes.

The movements by the players inside the *roda* reflect the rhythms played. Depending on the rhythms or beats being played, the game can be either slow and treacherous, fast and aggressive, or open and harmonious.

There are many beats to choose from. Some are universal, such as *Angola*, *São Bento Pequeno*, *São Bento Grande*. Others are peculiar to one region or another, or were created by various persons. That is the case of the rhythms played by practitioners of *Capoeira Regional*, who play to the rhythms created by Mestre Bimba—*São Bento Grande (de Regional)*, *Cavalaria (de Regional)*, *Iúna*, *Amazonas*, etc.

THE CHANTS

The chants are not merely an accompaniment to the rhythms created by the *berimbau*; singing along with others in the *roda* is essen-

16. The use of three instruments with deep, medium and high-pitched sound is used in many African musical structures. We find it in *candomblé* (Afro-Brazilian religion), where three types of drums are used, except that the deep-sounding drum improvises (instead of the high-pitched *berimbau*, which improvises in capoeira). We also find this structure in Western music that has roots in African culture, such as rock-and-roll ("grandson of the blues") with the bass, rhythm and solo guitar.

tial to creating the necessary energy level required for the games to unfold and manifest themselves in the deepest and most complete way.

Also, within the three basic types of chants or *chulas*—the *ladainha*, the *quadras* and the *corridos*—there can be found a series of teachings, a code of conduct and the basic premises of a philosophical world view.¹⁷ The *ladainha* is sung by the “soloist” before the start of a game, and is followed by a second part which is answered by the “chorus.” *Quadras* are four-verse songs sung by the soloist and answered by the chorus. *Corridos* are one- or two-verse songs sung by the soloist and answered by the chorus.

If it can be said that “the *berimbau* teaches”—as the old mestres like to say—its teachings would be directed at the deepest reaches of the human consciousness.

But with the chants we find another, more rational type of teaching, based on the life experience of the elderly practitioners of this game. Let us examine a few verses of the *chulas*:

*No Céu entra quem merece,
Na Terra vale é quem tem.
Passar bem ou passar mal,
Tudo na vida é passar, camará.*

You enter heaven on your merits;
Here on Earth what you own is all that counts.
Fare you well or fare you poorly,
All on this Earth is but farewell, comrade.

(Traditional capoeira song)

17. The *ladainhas* usually “open” or begin the *roda*. They are typical of Capoeira Angola.

*Ê! Maior é Deus!
Ê! Maior é Deus!
Pequeno sou eu.
O que eu tenho foi Deus quem me deu.
Na roda da capoeira
Grande e pequeno sou eu.*

Ê! God is greater!
Ê! God is greater!
Little am I.
What I have God gave me.
In the capoeira *roda*,
Both great and small am I.

(Mestre Pastinha)

Many songs are of unknown origin; others, however, are written by very well-known capoeiristas:

*A lei de Murici:
Cada um trata de si.*

The law of Murici:
I’m looking out for me.

(Mestre Leopoldina)

*Não seja vaidoso
Nem precipitado.*

Be you neither vain
Nor be you rash.

(Mestre Pastinha)

*Era Bimba, era Pastinha,
Era Besouro e Abêrrê
Que jogavam capoeira
Como seu modo de ver.*

There was Bimba, there was Pastinha,
There was Besouro and Abêrrê,
All who used to play capoeira,
All in their very own way.

(Mestre Lua)

Other songs speak about the atmosphere of criminality in which capoeira was born and developed:

*Meu patrão sempre me dizia
Não fume desse negócio.
Se é de madrugada,
é arma de fogo e velório.*

My boss would always tell me
Don't smoke any of that stuff.
If it's late at night,
You're talking firearm and a deathwatch.

(Mestre Bimba)

Then there are the songs that relate stories of encounters with "enchanted ones," with people who are possessed, and with the devil himself:

*Tava lá no pé da cruz
Fazendo minha oração
Quando chegou Dois-de-ouro
Como a figura do Cão.*

There I was at the foot of the cross,
Saying my prayer,

When *Dois-de-ouro*¹⁸ arrived
Like the figure of the Dog.¹⁹

In W. Rego's excellent book entitled *Capoeira Angola* (mentioned earlier) we find many interesting chants such as this one:

*Riachão tava cantando
Na cidade de Açu
Quando apareceu um negro
Da espécie do urubu.*

Riachão was singing
In the city of Açu,
When a Negro arrived
Of the vulture kind.

In this song, the "Negro of the vulture kind" challenges Riachão to sing and improvise verses with him. Later it is revealed that he is the devil himself.

As is only natural for a game that is part of the vast and complex whole of Afro-Brazilian culture, many chants allude to *candomblé* deities, many times by the name of their corresponding Catholic saint. *Candomblé* is one of the religions the Africans brought to Brazil from their home continent, and it can be found in Brazil in its almost pure African form as well as mixed with native Indian and European cultures. *Candomblé* is the cult of the *orixas* (*ori* = head, *xá* = strength), or *orishas*, the cosmic energies that rule humans, the world and life itself.²⁰

These *orixas* constitute a pantheon of gods similar to the ones we find in other ancient cultures such as the Scandinavian Viking

18. Two of diamonds; famous capoeirista.

19. Nickname for the devil.

20. Although *candomblé* is something apart from capoeira, in the past most capoeira players belonged to that religion. That is the reason we find so many references to it in capoeira songs.

culture or the classical Greek and Roman cultures. This song is an example:

*Santo Antonio é protetor da barquinha de Noé,
ê, da barquinha de Noé.*

Saint Anthony is the protector of Noah's little ark,
ê, of Noah's little ark.

Here the song speaks of "Saint Anthony" in the context of the biblical ark, but, in fact, it is referring to Ogun, the god of battles and war who is also the deity associated with iron.

Ai, ai, ai, ai, São Bento me chama.

Ai, ai, ai, ai, Saint Bento is calling me.

Saint Bento is said to protect against snake bites, and it is also the name given to two *berimbau* rhythms, São Bento Pequeno and São Bento Grande.

Among all the animals, the snake is the most celebrated one in capoeira songs, maybe because of its flexibility, and the fact that when it attacks it is quick, precise, treacherous and lethal. Here is one of the many songs that make reference to snakes:

*Olha a cobra que morde
Senhor São Bento.*

Watch out for the snake that bites,
Senhor São Bento.

It is very common for songs to guide the action of the players inside the *roda*:

*Ai, ai, Aidê, joga bonito que eu quero ver . . .
Joga bonito que eu quero aprender.*

Ai, ai, Aidê, play pretty 'cause I want to see . . .
Play pretty 'cause I want to learn.

And to leave no doubt that the chants reflect the action inside the *roda*, one needs only to hear the lyrics to the following chant:

*Cabra correu com medo de apanhar . . .
correu, correu com medo de apanhar.*

The guy ran, scared of getting clobbered . . .
He ran, he ran, scared of getting clobbered.

Another less obvious but equally important aspect of these chants is to allow the capoeira player who has just arrived at a *roda* to easily bring his energy in tune with the energy of those already there. He is thus able to relax and unwind the tensions accumulated throughout the day.

A more subtle function performed by the chants is that they allow players to catch their breath. Just like the swimmer who raises and dips his head in a rhythmic breathing pattern, the participants in a *roda* are also forced to enter a rhythmic breathing pattern as they respond in chorus fashion to the chants that others are leading. After finishing a game, many times tired and breathless, singing in chorus is a wonderful way to catch your breath!