

*JOGO DE MANDINGA*

—GAME OF SORCERY—

SECRET HISTORIES AND BODILY PRACTICE  
IN *CAPOEIRA ANGOLA*  
THE GAME-DANCE-FIGHT FROM BAHIA, BRAZIL

A Thesis Proposal

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By

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## INTRODUCTION

*Capoeira* (kah-PWEH-dah) is a unique intertextual practice that brings together aspects of fighting, dancing, playing, music, and ritual. As one of the most visible signs of Brazil's deep African heritage, capoeira is also a living cultural archive, encompassing over 500 years of history, mythology, ritual, slavery, prohibition, resistance, and survival.

Since the beginning of its decriminalization in the 1930s, capoeira has also become the national sport of Brazil—a *jogo bonito* (“beautiful game”) second in popularity only to football soccer. In more recent decades, capoeira has even emerged as a global phenomenon—championed as a fighting form equivalent to other martial arts, a breathless show for tourists and theater audiences, and a source of inspiration for choreographers, break dancers, Hollywood action heroes, fitness gurus, and video game characters. Thus, a cultural form practiced primarily by marginalized, lower class Brazilians of African descent has managed to transcend the boundaries of race, culture, and country to offer the world a fascinating way to “play” through the difficulties and oppressions of everyday life.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The practice of capoeira dates back at least to the 18th-century colonial era in Brazil, and perhaps hundreds of years earlier, to a practice of dance-fighting found in West Central Africa. Because it has been passed down from one practitioner to another, often under conditions of secrecy, few outsiders have had access to the secrets of capoeira until relatively recently (c. 1940). As a result, its history is riddled with complexities and contradictions that are only just beginning to be unraveled.

Major problems haunt researchers of capoeira in this regard. First, there is the relative scarcity and unreliability of “hard” historical and ethnographic documentation about African and slave culture throughout the period of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>1</sup> This is due in

part to ethnocentrism on the part of European documentors,<sup>2</sup> as well as the deliberate destruction of documentation by the Brazilian government in the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty extends to doing field research in today's West Central Africa, where the historically important slave-trading areas now known as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo have suffered vile civil wars and mass displacements of people in recent years. Furthermore, the notoriously heterogeneous and often secretive nature of present-day capoeira culture itself makes it difficult (not to mention politically explosive) to differentiate older traditions from newer innovations or stylistic hybrids.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Despite these serious stumbling blocks, capoeira has attracted the interest of a wide range of researchers in various fields. The inherently multidisciplinary nature of the form—bringing together movement, music, ritual, and individual resourcefulness into one practice—has already led to examinations of the form informed by cultural anthropology, athletic pedagogy, Latin American and African history, performance studies, martial arts, and Brazilian ethnomusicology, among others.

For scholars of dance or movement studies, however, the most important source of information about capoeira *is the movement itself*. Yet this is precisely the area which has been almost totally neglected by current scholarship. Because of this I believe it is essential, as well as timely, to undertake such a study. While such work must reasonably focus on the contemporary practice of capoeira (which is arguably a “reenactment” of an earlier practice) I believe that an in-depth examination of capoeira movements from the point of view of “bodily history” may offer us important glimpses into the long-forgotten past and at the same time speak to the current situation of Afro-Brazilians themselves.

This research may also allow scholars to gain a deeper understanding about how

an African (or *Africanist*) movement form would have been utilized to comment on and/or resist the institution of slavery. And because capoeira shares a history of bodily oppression and resistance with other African diasporic forms (including Afro-Cuban dance, jazz dance in the U.S., and other Brazilian forms such as the *samba*), it may also offer new perspectives on the experiences of the African diaspora in the Americas in general.

Studying capoeira may even offer a new way to consider the body itself—as a rich source of historical, pedagogical, dynamic, kinesthetic, and cognitive information. With its inherent deceptions, surprises, layers of meaning, and physical demands on the body, capoeira may come to be appreciated as a well rounded approach to health, survival, and long life (as evidenced by the number of capoeira *mestres*—masters—practicing well into their 70s and 80s).<sup>4</sup>

Such investigations are also likely to shed light on the vitality of the practice of capoeira outside of Brazil: in the academies and universities of North America, Europe, and Asia, where capoeira has flourished, and where its future may lie.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This thesis is intended as a preliminary, and evolving effort to a) bring together some of the “hard” facts of historical research on capoeira and related forms, while placing a certain “faith” in the oral—and bodily—history of capoeira as learned through my own research, training, and teaching in the form. This thesis may also serve as preliminary attempt to b) document and analyze the teachings and movements of capoeira for future researchers, as a complement to traditional instruction by a living capoeira *mestre*, not a replacement.

Additionally, it is hoped that by speaking from within the practice, capoeira may be seen as a tradition worthy of preservation, and of continuing relevance.

## ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This work will focus almost exclusively on the traditional form of capoeira, known as *capoeira angola*, as it has been transmitted to me by my teacher, Mestre Caboquinho. Mestre Caboquinho (b. José Dantas, 1964) is a native of Bahia, Brazil, who currently lives in Detroit, Michigan. He is one of the foremost proponents of traditional *capoeira angola* outside of Bahia. In accordance with his own teaching philosophy, I am approaching *capoeira angola* as a tradition in its own terms: not a “modernized” version of a traditional practice, but a *direct descendant and living representation* of a traditional practice.

The most obvious limitation of this approach is my own status as a relative beginner in the form. In *capoeira angola*, the giving of ranks and titles is often a long and complicated process that must ideally be presided over by a community of *mestres*.<sup>5</sup> So, in the writing of this thesis, I have taken on an unusually high level of responsibility which, in some eyes, may be seen as presumptuous and premature.<sup>6</sup> My awareness of this dilemma has necessitated the framing of this thesis as a “preliminary and evolving” effort. At the same time, Mestre Caboquinho believes that under his guidance, he has prepared me to work well “within the tradition” of *capoeira angola*. As such, he has acknowledged the legitimacy of my research, as well as my leadership of a satellite group of his organization, the Tribo Afro-Bahiana de Capoeira Angola Tradicional (T.A.B.C.A.T.), and my continued teaching of an introductory capoeira course at The Ohio State University Department of Dance.

As a scholarly pursuit, however, it may be asked whether it is even possible to claim an “authentic” tradition of capoeira. Indeed, among most capoeira practitioners themselves (and a majority of scholars), it is generally accepted that many of the traditions of capoeira have been lost, rediscovered, and reinvented throughout the years, especially since the 1960s. In other words, capoeira has supposedly “adapted” to its surroundings, and “evolved” through time, as any movement style passed informally from individual to indi-

vidual is likely to do.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, while it may seem reasonable to acknowledge that the capoeira performed in today's academies is somewhat different from the street rodas of Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and Bahia in the 1860s, or the earlier dance-fights of Africa,<sup>8</sup> it is also true that the notion of a continuity of “bodily history” has remained largely unaddressed. In other words, instead of limiting my attention to what has *changed* in the practice of capoeira, this thesis will also try to focus on *what has probably stayed the same*. As a matter of “faith,” then, I will often write from the view that, despite some changes on the surface, *the core principles of capoeira have survived relatively intact*.

(With regard to the problematic use of the word “faith” in a work of scholarship, I shall simply acknowledge, for now, that it is my faith in the traditions of *capoeira angola* that has allowed me to access some of its deeper truths, and to gain the [always provisional] trust of my own *mestre*, without whom this work would be irrevocably diminished.)

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As already noted, capoeira has in recent years attracted students and scholars from a variety of academic disciplines. While this has led to a “mini-boom” of articles and books on the subject, the number of scholarly writings on capoeira (especially in English) has remained relatively small. This may be attributed in part to the fact that the sources of academic and historical knowledge about capoeira are also relatively scarce. As stated earlier, research into the historical record of capoeira is riddled with difficulties. Moreover, before the 1930s, capoeira was considered a criminal activity unworthy of attention or serious research (a stigma that remains prevalent even today).<sup>9</sup> Because of this, older scholars of Brazilian and capoeira history—notably, early 20th century writers such as Manuel Querino, Edison Carneiro, and Arthur Ramos—have generally relied on the same set of primary

materials: consisting of a few tourist accounts, romantic pulp novels, police and military records, and the rare ethnographic morsel from the 1800s. They often turned towards ethnographic research on their own, investigating the capoeira of their own time and making forays into the oral history of Afro-Brazilian culture. These descriptions provided intriguing glimpses into Bahian capoeira at the turn of the 20th century. However, because they were not practitioners, their accounts are of limited value today. Others, such as the Rio de Janeiro author of a 1907 guide to capoeira training, even published anonymously, so as to avoid legal attention during the long prohibition of the form from 1890–c. 1940.

With the exception of a few other “manuals” of capoeira practice, very little additional scholarship was made available until the publication of Waldeloir Rego’s *Capoeira Angola: ensaio sócio-etnográfico* (1968), a 400-page volume collecting a wide range of materials from Bahia, primarily songs and etymologies. Even so, almost twenty years would elapse before anyone else attempted to follow this work up more thoroughly. While a handful of historians such as Muniz Sodré, Robert Farris Thompson, and Luís César de Souza Tavares published essays and related tracts in the 1980s, most readily available writings about capoeira published after 1968 have been by *practitioners* with a mixed level of academic experience.

Students of the famed Mestre Bimba, father of the modernized form of *capoeira regional*, have dominated the discussion thus far. Works by these students, including Jair Moura (1980), Mestre Itapoan (1992), Angelo Augusto Decâncio Filho (various), and Mestre Acordeon (1986), along with other notable books by Nestor Capoeira (1995) and Mestre Bola Sete (1989), have mostly documented personal experiences, the teachings of their own *mestres*, or the recollections of other old *mestres*.

Since 1990s, however, another generation of scholars—including more from the U.S. (and even some of the earlier writers such as Nestor Capoeira, who has since gained an aca-

demic title)—have taken on the more ambitious task of uncovering the history of capoeira through more rigorous archival, historical, phenomenological, anthropological, socio-political, and even theological research. Authors such as Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares (1994, 2002), Antônio Liberac Cardoso Simões Pires (2002), Greg Downey (1998, 2005), Letícia Vidor de Sousa Reis (1997), J. Lowell Lewis (1992), T. J. Desch-Obi (2000, 2004), Augusto Januário Passos da Silva (2003), and Floyd Merrell (2005) have greatly expanded the scope and depth of the literature of capoeira.

Of these, Desch-Obi and Soares are the most thorough. In his Ph.D. dissertation (2000) Desch-Obi provides a very convincing argument about the transmission of African foot-fighting techniques to Brazil, while Soares (in *A Negregada Instituição*, 1994, and *A capoeira escrava*, 2002) has pored through police and military records on three continents to provide a very detailed record of capoeira in 19th-century Rio de Janeiro, encompassing nearly 1000 pages thus far. Soares' recent move to Bahia suggests he may move onto the history of Bahian capoeira next.

Yet even such towering works of scholarship have done little to describe, let alone analyze, the movements of capoeira themselves. This astonishing fact calls attention to the scarcity of research into what is seemingly the most important aspect of capoeira: *the movement*. The only authors who have thus far attempted any kind of preliminary analysis of capoeira movements have been J. Lowell Lewis (1992), who interspersed his highly detailed semiotic analysis with terms culled from Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Dance Dynamics; and Greg Downey (1998, 2005), who has examined capoeira movements from a phenomenological viewpoint. Still, the movements of the form have yet to be thoroughly investigated as a *primary source* of data in a work of serious academic scholarship. This thesis will attempt to partially address an unfortunate lack.

## METHODOLOGY

### DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This thesis will be structured in two sections. In Section One, I will focus on historical issues, such as an outline of Brazil's early history, and an examination of various African, rural, urban, and recent influences on the form. I shall attempt to incorporate historical, contemporary, and oral sources in this effort.

Section Two will focus on the movements of *capoeira angola* using observational and kinesthetic techniques based primarily on the framework of Laban Movement Analysis. This section will focus on Effort Qualities, Body/Shape, Space Design, and Dance Dynamics, and will also include an as-yet-undetermined number of examples of capoeira movements and sequences written in Labanotation, designed to provide future scholars with a glance into the form's overall characteristics, strategies, and performance style. These examples may also serve as the beginning of a more thorough documentation of the form.

An appendix on the music and instruments of *capoeira angola*, with some thoughts about the dialogue between music and movement, will also be included.

### PROCEDURES

In exploring the central themes of this thesis, I have come about my hypotheses by combining deductive and inductive research procedures. For example, at times, I have approached capoeira with a specific idea about its function throughout history (i.e., "capoeira as a martial art"), and have pursued material that would support this idea. At other times, I have tried to examine capoeira from its own discourse, allowing its philosophies and movements to inform my analysis. Much of this discourse has been ascertained from my own conversations with *mestres* and fellow students, as well as the experience of taking class and

performing capoeira in a wide variety of situations myself.

In reconstructing a meaningful narrative about the history of capoeira, I have tried a similar approach: combining (often contradictory) written, photographic, oral, anecdotal, sartorial, pedagogical, and bodily sources into a cohesive whole. In this, I have at times allowed myself to engage in “speculative history,” in order to understand otherwise inaccessible psychological aspects of the form. While this procedure cannot in and of itself provide verifiable data in the traditional research sense, I believe it has been a valuable tool, perhaps similar to the exobiologist’s use of imagination to describe possible (but unprovable) conditions for the evolution of alien life forms.

My position as a scholar, practitioner, and even teacher of the form has also offered me an invaluable, insider’s point of view to this form, which arguably offsets any potential dangers of the “speculative” approach. As a practitioner who has fully given himself over to the traditions, logic, and philosophy of *capoeira angola*, I have been given unprecedented access to the secrets of the form. In ethnographic terms, this would be described as a *reflexive* ethnography, permeated by my own personal findings and experiences.

## SOURCES OF DATA

For the historical section of the thesis, I have drawn primarily from the major texts on capoeira, as well as a few lesser known sources (see Bibliography). I have also relied on secondary sources at The Ohio State University to provide a more general context about the African experience in Brazil. Specific research was also conducted at the NYPL Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Unfortunately, academic research in Bahia was limited to the Biblioteca Central dos Barris in Bahia, due to a strike of university library workers.

I have also relied heavily on a number of internet sites, some of which contain quite

extensive information, often including: translations of primary texts, transcriptions of and/or essays on historical texts, collections of personal research, and critiques of current scholarship. Capoeira internet forums have also been a useful way of crosschecking certain information; they also offer a window into current, worldwide conversations about capoeira, from beginners trying to clear up misconceptions, to longtime practitioners arguing about the fundamental issues of capoeira history.

As might be expected, however, my most important resource (for movement, as well as oral history) has been my *mestre* and teacher, Mestre Caboquinho. As of this writing (January, 2005), I have studied with Mestre Caboquinho for two and a half years, and also joined his organization for a five week stay in Salvador, Bahia (August, 2004). In Bahia, I had the opportunity to train, perform, and research capoeira with members of T.A.B.C.A.T. and on my own. Since 2001, I have also participated and observed at the New York City academy of Mestre João Grande, a Bahian now in his 70s, who is considered the foremost representative of the older lineage of *capoeira angola* in the U.S.

The other source of data is my own teaching of the form at The Ohio State University, which has involved several quarters worth of 10-week classes through the Department of Dance, as well as nearly four years of leading a capoeira group (now an official T.A.B.C.A.T. satellite) in Columbus. Through these experiences, I have had the unique opportunity of transmitting capoeira to new students in the midst of learning it myself.

This has led to some misrepresentations, miscommunications, and confusions (especially with my own *mestre*), but the process of sorting through these problems has also yielded a number of interesting discoveries (including new pedagogical tools, and better understanding my role as “*mestre*” or leader of a capoeira group) as well as questions (such as the relevancy of a “traditional” but ambiguous form to a more “modern” and literal-minded North American audience).

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Academic materials—books, articles, texts, etc.—as well as internet materials have already largely been compiled. These may be further honed and sorted as the thesis progresses. As a number of materials are written in Portuguese (at which I am an acceptable reader), some translations for the benefit of the reader may therefore be required.

My classroom experiences with Mestre Caboquinho (and others) has been compiled by means of extensive class notes and occasional photographs and recordings.

My teaching experiences, discoveries, and questions have been collected by means of teaching notes, personal anecdotes, student assignments, questionnaires, take-home examinations. I may also conduct a number of interviews with current and former students to clarify any questions.

## DESCRIPTION OF DATA-GATHERING INSTRUMENTS

Most of the written materials have been collected by means of standard research methods such as extensive library and web searches. Class and other “live” cultural materials (primarily in Bahia) have been gathered by means of a Minidisc recorder, videotape, and digital still photography.

However, because transmission of the form is so dependent on physical demonstration (and because most *mestres* are uncomfortable with the use of recording devices, for reasons which I hope to adequately convey), my own “muscle memory” (aided by written notes and recollections) will often serve as my primary “instrument.” In using these reflexive ethnographic methods of data gathering, from my own personal experience, and the memory of struggling and sweating with the movements and philosophies of *capoeira angola*, it is hoped that this thesis may be an appropriate addition to the nascent field of “capoeira studies.”

## NOTES

1. Chike Aniakor is more optimistic about the number of materials available: “. . . there are indeed materials which can aid early dance studies in spite of their severe limitations in terms of the tendency for cultural-prejudicial interpretations. . . .” Chike Aniakor, “Early Written Sources on African Dances from the Seventeenth Century to 1915,” in *The Spirit’s Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation and Continuity in Sub-Sahara*. Esther A Dagan, ed. Montreal: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications, 1997. p. 56.

2. Aniakor (ibid.) refers to Adam Jones and Beatrix Heintze’s assertion that “. . . few academic historians of Africa—whether African or non-African—would seriously deny that our knowledge of sub-Saharan Africa (taken as a whole) between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (the period for which oral tradition is of most relevance) must and always will rest principally (though by no means exclusively) on European sources.” They also add that “in many cases the quantity of the materials is offset by its unreliability.” p. 56.

3. In 1890, Ruy Barbosa, then Finance Minister of Brazil, ordered the burning of all government documentation about slavery. See Edison Carneiro, *Antologia do negro brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1967. p. 89. In more recent years there has been some doubt as to how much of the material was actually destroyed.

4. For example, at this writing (Jan 2005), João Pequeno is about 88 years old, João Grande is about 72, Boca Rica is about 67. Mestre Curió, himself about 70 years old, claims his father still plays capoeira in his 100s (!).

5. In the days before capoeira academies (c. 1920), the title of *mestre* was given informally and liberally, not only to capoeira practitioners but as a respectful title (similar to the informal use of “Don” and “Doña” in Spanish). However, while the title of *mestre* is still used as an honorary, informal one, and continues to be bestowed upon older capoeira practitioners, it is incredibly difficult to gain the title “officially.” A number of prominent *mestres* of *capoeira angola*, in fact, were never given their title by any recognized body. This remains a source of quiet controversy in the world of *capoeira angola*, which prides itself on being different from more contemporary styles of capoeira, in which the position of *mestre* has often been severely devalued.

6. I estimate that the average time it takes to become a *mestre* in *capoeira angola* is approximately 20 years. The intermediate titles such as *trenel* (trainer) and *contra-mestre* (half or assistant *mestre*) may take approximately 3–5 years and 8–10 years to obtain, respectively. As I have only been training for approximately 4 years (but only 2 1/2 with my *mestre*) I might qualify as an “intermediate beginner.”

7. Bira Almeida (Mestre Acordeon) is one of the more prominent advocates of what might be called the “adaptive” view of capoeira. An excellent online essay entitled “Capoeira: An Introductory History” is permeated by this idea, summed up unequivocally by the assertion that “capoeira has undergone many changes throughout the times.” When I posed this to Mestre Caboquinho, he dismissed the notion, saying that “capoeira doesn’t change.” In his view, the core principles of capoeira are in and of themselves adaptable enough to survive in different contexts without changing. It is worth noting here that, in his own academy, Acordeon has gone against a number of practices taught by his own *mestre* (Mestre Bimba), including the use of belt rankings. See Bira Almeida, “Capoeira: an Introductory History,” <<http://www.capoeira.bz/articles/history.html>>, 1996.

8. Indeed, Acordeon has made the reasonable (Western) assertion that we cannot “reconstruct” the capoeira of even 100 years ago. See *Capoeiragem na Bahia*, Dir. José Umberto. IRDEB/TVE, Bahia, Brazil, 2000.

9. Nearly all of the Brazilian Dictionaries I have consulted have identified “capoeira” with criminality, even into the 1970s. Even today, middle-class Brazilians look at capoeira with disdain. A member of our group who revealed his devotion to capoeira to a 20-something ladyfriend in Bahia was immediately chastized for “not being serious.”

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