



## Prospects of Capoeira in the age of globalization

by Luiz Renato Vieira

Capoeira is a manifestation of Brazilian culture that bears very peculiar features: it is a blend of fight, game and dance executed to the sound of musical instruments, claps and chanting. Aside from being an exceptional self-defence and fitness system, capoeira stands out among the sports range for being the sole one founded on Brazilian cultural traditions. For all this, capoeira is gaining ever more ground in schools and universities in Brazil and worldwide.

There is great controversy with regard to the history of capoeira, particularly in reference to the period comprising its birth – likely in the seventeenth century – and the nineteenth century, when reliable records appear bearing descriptions in more detail of this cultural expression.

One of the discussions that most captivated the scholars addressing the art-fight revolved around this question: was capoeira born in Africa or in Brazil? Presently, this is considered a matter already settled, since the vast majority of authors that write on the history of capoeira agree with the hypothesis that it would have been created in Brazil by the African negroes brought by the Portuguese from the beginnings of colonization for slave labour in plantations, livestock-rearing, mining and urban activities.

Although it has been sufficiently clarified that capoeira is a Brazilian martial art, it is necessary to consider it as part of the constant dynamics of the Afro-Brazilian culture. Thus, capoeira arose from a set of pre-existing aspects in the cultures of the African communities (rituals, dances, games and musical culture). The

appearance of capoeira must be thought of, in a certain way, as in the very martial arts traditional of the Orient that are the philosophical expressions of their creator peoples and that are integrated with other facets of social life, such as religion and work.

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It is thus that we must understand the question: capoeira arose in Brazil as a resistance fight of a community that brought an immense cultural baggage from its original land and that needed to develop a set of attack and defence techniques by virtue of the situation of oppression that it experienced during slavery. Further still, we must deem capoeira a part of the entire process of resistance by slaves in Brazil that also expressed itself in religion, arts, cuisine, etc. In other words: it was necessary for the slaves to not just remain alive and fight for their freedom, but also to preserve aspects of their ancestral culture.

Gradually, capoeira managed to overcome prejudices and became a martial art acknowledged all over Brazil. It came to be employed at schools and universities as an instrument toward educating on, and the treasuring of, popular culture. Throughout the twentieth century, capoeira conquered many spaces and, from the 1980's, the process of publicizing it in other countries intensified. Capoeira, with its music and aesthetic

wealth, came to be known worldwide as one of the principal symbols of Brazilian culture. The fact of its being at the same time a form of fight, body evolutions and a sport of acrobatic characteristics practised to the sound of musical instruments confers to capoeira an enormous potential to be explored in the formal and informal educational processes. One of the main tasks of the researchers into capoeira nowadays consists of analyzing the educational potentials of capoeira, bearing in mind its insertion in distinct societies and cultures.

Great, in fact, are the challenges placed before the international expansion of capoeira. Indeed, as it becomes recognised internationally as a sport and an important instrument in the educational process, there arises the possibility of occurrence of modifications in its features. The question that poses itself is related to the possibility of adapting capoeira to the countries in which it is accepted and practiced, preserving, at the same time, that which defines it as a fight born from resistance by slaves in Brazil. We grasp that this historical linkage and this cultural reference should not be lost.

Indeed, although capoeira is a martial art of much aesthetic and beauty, it is not just that. Its richness is found precisely there where the spectator does not see at first instance: in the traditions, in the respect toward the figure of the Master, in the rituals, in the music and in its historical memory.

The challenge of the master of capoeira acting outside Brazil is, precisely, to build paths toward incorporation of capoeira into the sport and education scene of the country in which he is, but always preserving the most important features, so that the Brazilian martial art may, ever more, consolidate itself as an important cultural expression in a globalised world.





# Singapore hosts IV International Capoeira Festival

Capoeiristas in an elated mood after after the Batizado

The 4th International Capoeira Festival was held in Singapore, from September 10 to 14, at the Toa Payoh Sports Hall. Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art form, is a non-contact sport that instantaneously hooks you, with its rapid fire energy and the pure joie de vivre exhibited by its practitioners, known as capoeiristas. The Festival included an Open House, when the Guest-of-Honour, Master Luiz Renato, talked about slavery in Brazil and described how Capoeira has evolved into a multi-cultural phenomenon over time. The Festival also included an intensive 3-day workshop conducted by renowned Brazilian Masters from Brazil, Austria, Germany, Holland, Philippines, France and Malaysia.

The Festival also featured the Batizado (“Baptism”) and Graduation Ceremony, where around 50 Singaporean practitioners were formally accepted as capoeiristas. The students were dressed in white, while the Masters were conspicuous in red tops and white slacks. While the students were warming up, we got a chance to talk to Master Oscar, from the Brazilian School of Capoeira, who had come down from Brazil especially for the occasion. He explained how Capoeira had

many “systems”, and the colour of the belt determined the level, much like in the Eastern martial art forms. However, he cautioned, there are so many different systems, that there is no way to know how “advanced” a capoeirista is at first glance. He explained that Capoeira has two main “federations”: the traditional and the modern, and there has been a debate about whether there should be an overall governing body, to regulate the practice of Capoeira.

Capoeira is a complicated martial art form. One of the questions posed to Master Luiz Renato after his speech was why is there no uniformity in the belts and styles internationally and whether there have been any efforts to standardise all of them into one system. Master Luiz Renato’s reply was fascinating. He said there have been efforts, but, under Brazilian law, there is no specific organisation to regulate the practice of this sport. Which, he continued, is good for Capoeira because of its diverse cultural manifestations. These different schools led to very interesting versions, and it is important to preserve these very differences. The variety observable in Capoeira is, if anything, more difficult to organise into one single “system”. Also, any

“standardization” of the rules and forms would result, inevitably, in a loss of some of its richness. That would be unfortunate, indeed. Mr. Luiz concluded by stating, “While studying the history of Capoeira, do not trust simple explanations. There aren’t any”.

His talk was followed by the Singaporean practitioners and students demonstrating their art form. The demonstrations began with the 50-odd students gathering in formation to showcase their talent and skill. This was followed by demonstrations by the Masters. The beauty of Capoeira was in full display, with the powerful beats of the music guiding the movements of the Capoeiristas. The athletic movements soon gave way to graceful dance-like choreography, all accompanied by furious drumming and hypnotic chanting of Afro-Brazilian songs. The drumming kept increasing in tempo, and so did the movements of the Masters, each of them taking turns to goad another into a display of sparring (known as jogo). Their frenzied motions soon became blurred, and they turned into furious, and unbelievable – are human beings capable of moving this fast? – hurricanes moving across the wooden floor. They were all so light on their feet, flitting about like

butterflies, and yet showcasing their incredible power. Everyone was completely pulled into the spirit of the music and there were cheers going all around, encouraging the already-perfect performances. The students had gathered in a circle around the Masters, in what is known as a roda (“circle”). The Masters continued with their skills display, and the chanting rose to a hypnotic level. The scene was surreal enough to transport the onlooker to the times of slavery, and somehow, it isn’t difficult to imagine the joy, and the acute sense of kinship, that the slaves would have got out of Capoeira, and to understand why they practiced it with such utter passion.

The practice of Capoeira is closely linked with philosophy, with emphasis on the individual, on the belief that the greatest opponent of an individual is himself, on respect and responsibility. One of the Masters ended the gathering with a call to “be proud of yourself”, and to be proud of your work, your beliefs and your life. Again, it was not hard to picture slaves reaffirming their dignity through the practice of Capoeira. Truly, this spirit of Capoeira shone through during the demonstrations that evening. ■

## History of Association of Capoeira Argola de ouro



Caption to be given

Master Ousado had first began teaching Capoeira at the Association of Filhos de Luanda in Brazil, which he founded in 1980. Master Ousado was the first master of Capoeira that arrived in London and founded the Association of Capoeira Argola De Ouro (London) in 1990 and in 2002 he brought capoeira to Singapore with the first school to be established in South-East Asia - the Association of Capoeira Argola De Ouro (Singapore).

Master Ousado having 36 years of experience in studying and teaching the Brazilian martial arts and art

form of Capoeira, has travelled extensively to spread the culture of Brazil and the philosophy of Capoeira. He has participated in professional competitions and has won several titles including being twicewrowned Champion of Paulista Federation of Capoeira (Adult Light Category), the All-Brazilian Vice- Champion of Capoeira and bronze medalist in the Open Games held in Santos Brazil. He has played an active role in promoting the study of the music and folklore behind capoeira by holding workshops in academic institutes such as the University of Rio de Janeiro, Queen Mary University in London, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

As a member of the Brazilian Capoeira Confederation, Master Ousado is actively involved in teaching capoeira and is highly regarded by other Capoeiristas (Capoeira students) from schools in America, Europe and Asia who have invited him to participate in their “batizados” (grading ceremony and baptism when students are initiated into the capoeira community).