**Capoeira**

**Summary**

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian movement practice that has been categorized as national sport, folklore, martial art, and dance. Although capoeira has been considered a game practiced primarily for leisure since the mid-twentieth century, throughout the nineteenth century it was a form of combat and self-defence based on kicking, tripping, grabbing and throwing, and techniques for handling weapons such as clubs and straight-razors. Throughout the twentieth century, musical accompaniment became an increasingly important element in capoeira practice. The composition of the musical ensemble, including the use of clapping, has changed over time and varies according to group affiliation and capoeira style.[[1]](#footnote-1) The second half of the twentieth century ushered in the formalization of capoeira instruction, taught in capoeira schools called *academias*. At that time, capoeira was re-configured along a tradition/modernity binary, giving rise to the two opposing styles (*angola* and *regional*) that still define capoeira practice in the twenty-first century. The simultaneous emergence of a ‘traditional’ and a ‘modern’ capoeira was emblematic of the construction of a modern national identity grounded in ‘folk’ traditions. In both styles, capoeira students attend capoeira classes taught by a *mestre* (master teacher) and participate in *rodas* (capoeira jams) at capoeira schools, both in Brazil and abroad. During *rodas*, players sit or stand forming a circle. Inside this circle, two players at a time engage in mock combat, attempting to trip each other and exchanging strikes that barely miss the opponent. Those watching often participate by singing call and response songs with the musical ensemble.

**Importance to modernism and modernization**

Throughout the nineteenth century, capoeira—then known as *capoeiragem*—was considered an illicit activity, although it was not formally criminalized during Brazil’s monarchic government (1822-1889). Shortly after the coup d’état known as the ‘Proclamation of the Republic’ (November 15, 1889), capoeiragem was included in the Brazilian criminal code of 1890, and practitioners of capoeira were persecuted throughout Brazil for the next two decades. In the mid 1920s, a group of Rio de Janeiro-based sports enthusiasts who also practiced capoeiragem—some of them well-known writers such as Henrique Coelho Netto—began publishing articles calling for the decriminalization of capoeira. They argued that capoeiragem held all the elements necessary for the perfect ‘physical culture’ of Brazilian citizens, and should therefore not only be removed from the criminal code, but also be declared Brazil’s national sport. While these authors argued that capoeiragem was capable of improving the health of its practitioners, they also agreed that, in order for the practice to be compatible with the country’s progress and embrace of modernity, capoeiragem itself needed to be ‘improved’ through borrowings from foreign combat forms (e.g. elements from boxing such as matches with timed rounds and the use of a point system for determining a winner). While attempts to ‘improve’ capoeiragem reflected the scientific racism prevalent at the time, this group of sports enthusiasts nonetheless proposed an Afro-diasporic practice as a means of ‘cultivating’ physically strong Brazilian citizens.

With legitimization as their goal, practitioners continued to ‘improve’ and modernize capoeiragem. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, capoeiragem was transformed into capoeira, the name change reflecting a desire for a modern technique of physical fitness, made uniquely Brazilian through its ‘folk’ and *mestiço* (racially hybrid) character. The resulting styles of capoeira became known as *Capoeira Regional* (regional capoeira), the form that emphasized its modernity and efficiency, and *Capoeira de Angola* (capoeira from Angola, later referred to as *capoeira angola*), the style understood to be an African ‘survival’ in need of protection and preservation.

One of the most famous capoeira innovators from the state of Bahia, Mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado, 1900-1974), with the collaboration of his students, developed a codified training method divided into fourteen lessons, which he later published as a multi-media manual and LP set titled *Curso de Capoeira Regional* (*Capoeira Regional Course*). By calling his style of capoeira ‘regional’, Bimba emphasized its affiliation with the region of Bahia, which, paradoxically, was being re-imagined as the ‘cradle’ of Brazilian tradition. Bimba’s *capoeira regional* course was known for its efficiency, and students were able to graduate in as little as six months. Through his innovative teaching methods and his emphasis on self-defence, Bimba attained respect for capoeira, which was finally removed from the criminal code in 1940. Among Bimba’s modernizations was the transformation of the movementknown as *peneirar* (to sift)—an improvised side-to-side movement used to deceive the opponent—into the *ginga*, taught as a warm-up and ‘basic step’ for capoeira practice. Bimba foregrounded the ginga in his manual: ‘Every lesson should be initiated with the ginga motion. It is important to stress the importance of the ‘ginga’ in all phases of capoeira’ (8). Bimba’s emphasis on the ginga had a profound, lasting impact on capoeira pedagogy.

Another innovator from Bahia who was influential in the process of modernization of capoeira was Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, 1889-1981). Although Pastinha is remembered as the ‘guardian’ of capoeira’s tradition, he, like Bimba, also strove to modernize the practice, approximating it to categories such as sport and physical culture. Bahia’s intellectual and artistic elite, however, continually praised Pastinha for preserving capoeira’s traditions from Angola. Pastinha’s writings echo early twentieth-century proposals of using capoeira as a means to improve one’s health and attain physical fitness, thus shaping the Brazilian ‘citizen of the future’. Like Bimba, who founded the *Centro de Cultura Física Regional* (Center for Regional Physical Culture), Pastinha was one of the founders of the *Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola* (Capoeira Angola Sports Center), later renamed *Academia de Capoeira Angola* (Capoeira Angola Academy). The institutionalization of capoeira in formal schools (*centros* or *academias*) in the 1940s and 1950s was an important step in the process of legitimization of the practice.

By the early 1960s, several *academias* of capoeira offered formal capoeira instruction in Bahia’s capital, Salvador. With the expansion of a tourism industry focused on Afro-Brazilian culture, these *academias* functioned not only as a place for capoeira lessons, but also as stages for demonstrations of capoeira for tourists visiting Bahia. Both Bimba and Pastinha staged capoeira demonstrations for tourists. Bimba’s demonstrations, however, were transformed into full-fledged folkloric shows in the mid 1960s. Even though Bimba’s capoeira had been configured as a ‘modern’ sport during the previous three decades, these tourist shows presented capoeira as an intrinsic part of Afro-Brazilian ‘tradition’, emphasizing its dance-like qualities and acrobatic feats.

Capoeira played an important role in shaping modern Brazil as a ‘land of contrasts’, where industrialization and progress demanded a nostalgic contrast with a national ‘folklore’ in need of protection and preservation. Capoeira embodies the paradoxes of a modern national identity crafted through a ‘folk’ tradition.

**References and Further Reading:**

Assunção, M. R. (2005) *Capoeira: A History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art.* London: New York: Routledge. (Assunção offers a comprehensive general history of capoeira in Brazil, covering the development of the practice throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing primarily in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia. This book has excellent notes and bibliography and is a good starting point for further research.)

Bimba, M. (c.1960) *Curso de Capoeira Regional* (*Capoeira Regional Course*) 1 sound disc: analog, 33 1/3 rpm; 12in + 1 booklet. Salvador: JS Discos. (This booklet and LP combination offers the reader a ‘course’ of *capoeira regional*, where Mestre Bimba's fourteen lessons are explained through written instructions and illustrations. The tracks on the LP are intended as accompaniment for practicing the movement sequences in each lesson. This manual is only available in Portuguese and is out of print.)

Pastinha, M. (1988 [1964]) *Capoeira Angola*. Salvador: Fundação Cultural do Estado da Bahia. (This book offers a brief introduction to the history and philosophy of *capoeira angola* according to Pastinha. It includes descriptions, as well as tips on execution, of selected *capoeira angola* attacks and defences; the book is illustrated with photographs of Pastinha’s students demonstrating these movement sequences. This book is only available in Portuguese and is out of print.)

Downey, G. (2005) *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Downey combines ethnography and phenomenology in this analysis of contemporary capoeira. Moving beyond previous analysis where capoeira's movement is regarded as symbolic of social processes, Downey focuses on the experience of movement. Downey's extensive ethnographic research is based on the Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho, GCAP.)

Reis, L. V. de S. (2000) *O Mundo de Pernas para o Ar: A Capoeira no Brasil.* (*The World Upside-down: Capoeira in Brazil*.) São Paulo: Publisher Brasil. (Reis considers both capoeira styles, angola and regional, as ‘invented traditions’ inasmuch as they reinvent the practice as Bahian, erasing associations with the violence of capoeiragem in Rio de Janeiro. She argues that both Bimba and Pastinha articulated modernity through a ‘black working class’ perspective. This book is only available in Portuguese.)

**Moving Image Material**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuOAGXpSe5k>

Bimba and his students perform for a film crew from the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA). France, c. 1965.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMUHKFwx05I>

*La Capoera*. Pastinha and his students perform for a film crew from the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA). France, c. 1963.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCtq7C2\_7fU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCtq7C2_7fU&feature=related)

This is the capoeira section of the documentary *Veja o Brasil*, produced by Brazilian folklorist Alceu Maynard Araújo circa 1950.

**Paratextual Materials**

Photographs of capoeira taken by Pierre Verger in Bahia during the 1940s and 50s are available at www.pierreverger.org.

The website www.portalcapoeira.com offers excellent resources for further research, such as free downloads of important capoeira texts, as well as capoeira music and films.

The website www.abeiramar.tv is an excellent source of capoeira videos; they also have a calendar of capoeira *rodas,* listing these events in several countries.

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1. Since the second half of the twentieth century, capoeira’s musical ensemble has been composed of one to three *berimbaus* (the musical bow iconic of capoeira), one or two *pandeiros* (tambourine), a *reco-reco* (wooden scraper) and an *agogô* (double bell), with the later addition of the *atabaque* (standing drum). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)