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Capoeira Angola: Dancing Between Two Worlds

by Kenneth Dossar

Research on African based martial arts throughout the black Atlantic world is now revealing in greater detail, connections between African based dance, games, and martial movements. One such form is the African based capoeira of Brazil. Little was known about capoeira in North America prior to the mid-1970s. Until that time most books and articles on the subject were written in Portuguese. An early article in English on capoeira appeared in EBONY MAGAZINE in 1948 wrongly calling capoeira “African Ju-Jitsu.” An equally misleading subtitle read, “Jitterbug Judo is murderous Brazilian sport.” The article has a negative, sensational, and extreme point of view, describing capoeira as a, “dance that smacked more of mayhem than choreography.” The writer obviously was neither informed on the aesthetics of African dance nor the history of African based martial arts. The history and the aesthetics of capoeira demand a more Africa centered analysis. Capoeira as a martial art is as significant to African culture as judo, karate or ju-jitsu are to Asian culture; as a dance form, capoeira is as serious as European ballet, and other African based dances including the rumba, samba, the mambo, and African-American dances including the cake walk and the jitterbug.

Over time, several styles of capoeira have developed and are summarized in Lewis’ Ring of Liberation. This paper examines the traditional form capoeira angola, it is in this form that the aspects of a game, a dance, and a martial art occur in their most balanced mix. The paper explores the African origins of capoeira then posits an aesthetic view of the form. I also relate capoeira angola to nationalism and liberation sentiments within the community of African descendants in Brazil. This paper is called, “Dancing Between Two Worlds.” The expression reflects the Kongo belief that existence is a constant movement between the world of the living and the world of the dead. According to Bunseki Fu-Kiau, a principle informant on Bakongo culture for Robert Farris Thompson and Wyatte MacGaffey, and author of several books on Kongo culture, “In the Kongo children have games in which they play at walking in the other world—when you walk on your hands at an upside down level you are walking in the other world.”

Generally, the dominant African cultures to be impacted by the slave-trade include the Fon of Dahomey, Nigeria’s Yoruba, and Bantu speaking people from the Kongo-Angola area of Southern Africa. More than 3.5 million Africans were forced into servitude in Brazil. The various peoples taken to Brazil came from the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa—an area extending from the Senegal river, south to the Kongo river in Angola. This area also was the source of Africans sold in North America and the Caribbean. During the early period of enslavement of Africans in Brazil, 68% were taken from the Kongo/Angola region, as such the earliest roots of African culture in Brazil are derived from Bantu people. During enslavement in Brazil, Africans cleared land for development, they worked in mining, agriculture, construction, in domestic service as well as on plantations.

The continuation of African culture in Brazil was due in large part to an underlying unity of African cultures, such that cultural elements reinforced each other even though several different ethnic nations were mixed together. In the area of religion for example, this indelible unity included the belief in one supreme being supported by other archetypical spiritual and ancestral beings; the belief that humans are intimately connected to nature; and that there are times when the spiritual world and the human world intersect, providing humans with divine inspiration.

Concerning the continuation and persistence of African aesthetics and traditions in New World plantation settings including North America, Morton Marks writes, “Descriptions of religious dances on the plantations go back at least as far as the mid-19th century…. The ring shout was a circle dance that culminated in trance, and from the early descriptions
resembled the group cult dances found in Haiti, Brazil, and Cuba, even to the counterclockwise direction of the dancers” (30).

Oral history cradles much of capoeira’s origins, often fact elides with fiction. In Capoeira: A Brazilian Arts Form, Bira Almeida quotes Jair Moura on a possible origin of capoeira. “In Southern Angola,” Moura writes, “there is a zebra dance, the N’golo that takes place during the celebration of the puberty of young girls when they stop being girls and pass to the role of women ready for marriage and child bearing. The young boy who wins the N’golo is directed to choose a wife from amongst the new initiates without paying the dowry. The N’golo is capoeira.” Moura goes on, “the slaves from the south that went to Brazil took with them a tradition of fighting with their feet” (30).

Art historian Robert Farris Thompson in his article, “Capoeira” not only offers possible origins of capoeira he also points to the persistent cultural unity extending through the Americas. Thompson writes, “A tradition of playful combat involving many ‘get down’ moves executed close to the earth and other strategems came from Kongo and took root in North America, the Caribbean and Brazil. There they changed in interaction with new cultures to emerge as four different—but apparently related—New World traditions: United States knocking and kicking, Afro-Cuban Mani or Bomboksa, the Lagya tradition of black Martinique and of course, capoeira of Brazil” (2).

The games, dances, and foot fighting confined within Brazil’s slave system, combined with the Africans’ desire for liberation and became a deadly form of self defense. In fights the story goes, Africans would spring on to their hands then kick, or they would sweep their opponents from their feet and to the ground with low kicks. Following confrontations, the Africans would run into the mountains where hiding places—quilombos afforded them freedom in communities based on African values. In colonial Brazil, capoeira was seen as a threat to the plantation system, because of this its teaching was banned. As a result, capoeira was put to music and disguised as a dance. Capoeira as dance and fight entered the 20th century rooted in the basic human right of freedom. As self-defense system born of African traditions, capoeira angola presents a holistic system incorporating aspects of African based dance with cosmology, and physical training—it is a system of human development.

The first academy to formerly teach capoeira was established by Manoele Machado in 1932. Machado (1889-1974) is credited with developing capoeira regional which incorporated techniques from other fighting arts. Vicente Pastinha (1889-1982) is credited with preserving traditional capoeira angola. His academy opened in 1941.

In the vocabulary of capoeira—since it is a game, people play capoeira rather than do capoeira. This distinction is important as it keeps players mindful of comradeship during competition. The term mestre or master is given to those who have after years of training, achieved a high level of proficiency mastering movements, songs, philosophy, instruments and have been sanctioned to teach. Those capoeiristas who play angola call themselves angoleiros, those who play capoeira regional refer to themselves simply as capoeiristas.

The traditional form—angola—stresses flexibility strength, ground techniques, and the ability to confuse the opponent through feints, and malicia. Capoeira regional on the other hand emphasizes a larger number of striking techniques, a faster pace, more up-right attacks, and does not stress the use of malicia. More than feinting, the concept malicia carries with it the ideas of distraction and deception, and was part of survival and resistance techniques developed by Africans and their descendants while enslaved, it emerges from, “the historical need to be disguised and thus encompasses the element of premeditated deception . . . To use malicia is to hide one’s intentions and abilities until they can be used to their utmost advantage”, writes Iria D’Aquino in, Capoeira: Strategies for Status, Power, and Identity (53).

Machado and Pastinha—mestres Bimba the innovator and Pastinha the traditionalist—are the most important names in modern capoeira. Within the capoeira community, players are given names at the time of their initiation or capoeira baptism. This important ritual of capoeira brings together masters, students, and members of the community to witness the “baptism” of students playing in the roda for the first time. Students play with a master, and are “baptized” when they are swept off their feet. The quintessential occurrence of capoeira angola is during the jogo or game, a ritual contest performed traditionally by men with increasing numbers of women now playing.

The jogo starts with two competitors squatting in front of a small group of musicians. Instruments providing musical support for the dance include a two toned ago-go bell, a standing drum—atabaque, a Brazilian tambourine called pandeiro and three gourd-resonating bows—berimbau, which are the
most important in this small orchestra. Berimbau
players hold a small woven and seed filled rattle
known as caxixi in one hand as they strike the bow’s
steel string with a thin stick. The musicians move the
gourd variously on and off their stomachs to achieve
different tones. A large copper coin or stone is also
held against the bow’s string to produce additional
tones.

The speed at which the music is played controls
the movements and tempo of the game. Almost
hypnotic, and consistent with African traditions of
polyrhythm, and call and echo capoeira’s music has
potential to induce increased levels of awareness and
physical performance in capoeiristas. Song lyrics
call on the supreme being, masters, and heroes for
protection for the roda’s participants. These actions
give the quality of ritual to the jogo, making the area
of the circle other worldly. Dona Richards writes,
“Ritual is . . . the ultimate philosophic expression of
the African world view . . . the modality within
which the unity of spirit and matter is perceived and
in which the eternal moment is achieved” (Asante
and Asante 213).

Following a song’s ladainha—a sort of prayer or
invocation and supplication, both players make symbols
with their hands on the floor at times making
the sign of the cross on themselves and slowly they
begin making offensive and defensive moves out
into the center of the circle. Players typically saida
or go out from a crouched position. They stealthy
move toward the center of the circle. The object of
the game is for the capoeiristas to use finesse, guile
and technique to maneuver one another into a
defenseless position rendering them open to a blow,
kick or sweep. Only one’s hands, head, and feet are
allowed to touch the floor. Being swept and landing
on one’s bottom disqualifies a player. In general
there is no contact from the strikes. An implied
strike is more admired particularly when the oppo-
nent has clearly been manipulated into an indefen-
sible position. Unnecessary aggression or temerity
in the game are frowned upon. Good clean contact
when it occurs is appreciated by players and specta-
tors alike and never a reason for a player to become
angry.

After several preliminary ground techniques,
the players stand upright and face to face harmoniz-
ing and mirroring each other in the basic rhythmic
and repetitive step of capoeira—the ginga. “The
word signifies a perfect coordination of the move-
ments of the body with the objective of distracting
the attention of the adversary, making him vulner-
able for strikes”, writes Vincente Pastinha in Ca-
poeira Angola (50). From this basic dance move-
ment, emerge a player’s golpes (strikes) and counter
golpes (counter strikes) including kicks and leg
sweeps. A good player will have an array of kicks
performed either, on foot or while supporting him-
self on one or both hands. Evasive movements—
saidas—include cartwheels and an array of body
shifts.

D’Aquino writes, “Every golpe, regardless of
its power and efficacy, has a moment which leaves
the fighter vulnerable. It may be just a fraction of
a second, either immediately before or immediately
after the contact of the golpe in which the fighter is
lifting his foot or facing away from his opponent”
(47). At these instances in the jogo a player can
perform a counter-strike exploiting his opponent’s
fleeting vulnerability. All strikes, evasions, and
counter-strikes are woven together creatively, the
ability of the capoeiristas to improvise keeps the
game’s action fluid and fresh. An excellent player’s
intuition tells him of the coming strike and how he
should place himself.

As the jogo intensifies, players perform incredin-
ly beautiful and graceful movements such as bal-
cancing their bodies on one hand, legs pulled in
close—they pose motionless as a cobra, ready to
strike a careless opponent with a kick. At times
during the game a player will stand upright in the
center of the roda, arms extended horizontally,
forming a cross, this movement is a chamada—a
call. His opponent will make a series of acrobatic
movements—handstands, flips, or spins, and then
carefully approach the standing player through
ground level movements. During these instances,
which Lowell Lewis identifies as “games within the
game” , players appear most vulnerable (161). When
the “called” player is directly in front of his
opponent, he carefully begins to stand, they move
close together, arms extended palm to palm, they
walk in concert forward and backward across the
roda. This movement enhances the dynamic tension
in the jogo because when malicia is operating, this
break in the fighting can be violated at any time.
The unstable truce ends with the players either descend-
ing to the floor, returning to ginga, or making an
attack. Other players may decide to enter the roda
and play with his or her choice of opponents, the
new game begins with the players performing the
ginga or they may start by squatting in front of the
berimbau.

A paradigm of seven aesthetic senses has been
identified by Kariamu Welsh-Asante as being uni-
versal to the African ethos. Concerning dance she

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writes, “The rhythmic quality of the aesthetic is the most distinguishable of its qualities . . . these senses refer to qualities . . . inherent in all of the dances of Africa, regardless of theme, ethnic group or geography” (Asante & Asante 74). This paradigm is a valuable lens through which capoeira angola can be viewed. Of these senses—multidirection, repetition, polyrhythm, dimensional, epic memory, holism and polycentric, several can be applied to capoeira angola and the jogo.

The ginga of capoeira angola is a multidirectional source of motion and energy—out, around, up and down. The ginga also gives capoeira angola a polycentric sense, for no matter what position a player is in on his feet, hands or head, he is centered. On dimensionality she writes, “Music is textured; the dance is textured . . . Something extra is occurring. The dimensional . . . speaks to the supernatural in space, the presence beyond the visual”. The jogo opens with song/invocation and the polyrhythmic music begins to create energy for the players whose improvised, acrobatic movements become inspired.

Related to dimensionality, is epic memory. Welsh-Asante writes, “Epic memory is not religious by definition, but can involve ritual; it is the conscious and subconscious calling upon the ancestors . . . to permit the flow of energy so that the artist can create”. Prior to their saida, players sing invocations, and make symbols on the ground and their bodies as a form of protection. From placing one’s hands on the ground energy is received and contact is made with the world of the ancestors, those who danced the N’golo, those who used capoeira as a means of liberation, as well as the spirit of mestres who are now in the other world. In doing this capoeiristas tie into epic myths which are according to Welsh-Asante, “historically thematic and axiological, they are generational and there is continuity with characters, local and structure” (Welsh-Asante 19).

“Silence or stillness is as much a part of the music or dance as sound or movement” notes Welsh-Asante (74-80). This sense appears throughout the jogo as well, for each part of the game has its place and for the jogo to remain true to tradition, each part occurs in a specific order. For example, players will not saida before the appropriate time in the song. With a limited number of basic movements, capoeira angola exhibits repetition and improvisation at the same time. More happens because of repetition, it produces a creative and instantaneous choreography, through which players open and close their bodies to attack, they constantly try to create advantageous positioning.

Was this martial aspect of Kongo culture the only aspect camouflaged within capoeira or are there deep structural aspects of the Bakongo worldview hidden in the game?

Wyatte MacGaffey outlines components of the Bakongo worldview and essential symbols:

“Kongo cosmology is implicit in all Kongo myths and rituals, which it endows with the sense of power and meaning they have for the actors. . . . The simplest diagram, which usually illustrates many cultural features, shows the worlds of the living and the dead in mirror opposition within a static and repetitive universe. Life is a cyclical or oscillatory movement between the worlds, resembling the path of the sun” (42).

The counterclockwise movement of the sun, making a circle as it orbits through four cardinal points is an important Bakongo sign (12). Mac-Gaffey elaborates:

“‘The movement of human life resembles that of the sun in that after being born into this world and spending a lifetime in it, the soul passes into another existence in the alternate world. . . . Cosmology is revealed . . . through the analysis of rituals. Kongo rituals proceed in a space that has first been laid out as a microcosm, sometimes by drawing a diagram on the ground. The simplest and most common diagram is a cross, not to be confused with the Christian cross’” (MacGaffey 514-16).

The jogo takes place within a circle which has been sketched on the ground or is imagined. Angola mestre Pedro Moraes Trindade describes the roda or circle as a microcosm of the real world where participants learn to play in a small circle, then take their survival skills out into a wider circle, the world at large, the roda is both space and sign.

Robert Farris Thompson also summarizes the priority of the cross as a Kongo symbol when he writes in The Four Moments of the Sun, “The existence of the Kongo cross . . . within a ‘wheel’ should make clear the rhetorical point of its existence, as forever distinguished from the standing emblem of Jesus Christ . . . the sign of the four moments of the sun predates the coming of the
Capoeira was a vehicle for liberation during the formation of the Brazilian empire and in the present when African Brazilian descendants are confined to the lowest social standings in that nation. Capoeira angola is liberating and nationalistic in that one cannot play capoeira without learning the history of African descendants in Brazil, and the role of the revolts of enslaved Africans. Capoeira angola does not exclude any one, through learning the form and the game, all can take part reconstructing Africa’s history in Brazil. Capoeira is nationalistic aligning itself with the history of the great quilombo of Palmares, and aligning itself with Kongo/Angola where the N’golo was performed.

In “Angolan Traits in Black Music, Games and Dances of Brazil”, Gerhard Kubik writes, “Some components of a cultural heritage can also be transmitted unconsciously between individuals and, ultimately, from generation to generation . . . a trait sometimes disappears from the surface of a specific culture for a certain historical period, for fifty or a hundred years including all verbal references to it. After some time, however when circumstances are favourable and a need arises . . . the lost trait may be reinvented . . . In a time of slavery and oppression some specific cultural traits may be forced to disappear among their carriers . . . They only retreat to a safer area of the psyche. . . . The implication is that in the New World there is a lot of African cultural material beneath the surface . . .” (50).

The resilience of African based culture, its ability to survive the exterminating pressures of European cultural hegemony in the New World, and the ability of African culture in the Americas to continually create and reconstruct itself in spite of racism and oppression point to future resurfacing of African based cultural traits. Capoeira angola, dancing between two worlds, is but one tool African descendants are using to reclaim African based culture.

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