

# THE GLOBALIZATION OF CAPOEIRA

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WHAT AT THE DAWN OF THE 20TH CENTURY WAS A PRACTICE LARGELY CONFINED TO FORMER SLAVES IN BRAZIL HAS NOW, AT THE OPENING OF THE 21ST CENTURY, BECOME A PRACTICE TAKEN UP BY PEOPLE OF EVERY ETHNIC BACKGROUND FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE IN OVER 130 COUNTRIES.



In recent years, many capoeiras<sup>1</sup> have left Brazil in search of recognition and a better life. Through this diaspora they have not only been instrumental in popularizing this martial arts style, but have also helped carry Brazilian culture abroad through talks and presentations describing capoeira as something “exotic, tropical, and very Brazilian.”

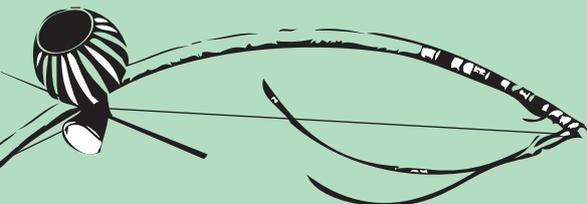
Back in the days of slavery in Brazil, blood flowed from the overseer’s quill<sup>2</sup> – as the saying went – a reference to the shrill denunciations of capoeira circulated in print by slaveholder interests.<sup>3</sup> Today the martial style is treated very differently by the political state. That much is evident in a number of initiatives recognizing and elevating this important symbol of Brazilian culture.

Just as the times then were different from what they are now, capoeira practitioners of those days pursued the practice with many different agendas. Even today, they are by no means a monolithic bloc. Capoeira in Rio de Janeiro was closely bound up with the organized mobs, street fighting and ward politics of the Second Empire (1840-1889). In Salvador, capoeiristas cultivated friendly relations with tavern owner, greengrocers and food stand operators delighted to sell to the crowds attracted by acrobatic displays.

In olden days, warehousemen, cartage operators, stevedores, haulers, traveling salesmen and even the unemployed gathered around bars, parks and open boulevards to gossip, drink and gamble. To them capoeira was both a source of entertainment and a way of protecting their turf. Nowadays we see professionals from many areas engaged in capoeira as a form of recreation. To many it is a job, a profession, a means of livelihood. A large number of other young people hope to find in capoeira opportunities for employment they cannot find at conventional institutions and companies.

With impressive creativity, they find in this form of cultural demonstration a source, albeit sketchy, of income. They overlook no possibilities in efforts to escape the fate of those pioneers – considered by many the grand masters of capoeira – who died in absolute poverty; mestres such as Pastinha, Bimba, and Valdemar da Liberdade, to name a few,<sup>4</sup> who “stood at the crossroads of fame and famine.” (ABREU, 2003, p. 14) Although in the 20th century they

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(1) To distinguish the representatives of capoeira (adepts, mestres, teachers, militants, etc.) we are using the term capoeira instead of *capoeirista*. This is because we believe the former have a broader scope of action within the culture, whereas *capoeirista* suggests to us a more specific or specialized sphere.

(2) A reference to an old ditty by Mestre Toni Vargas.

(3) According to Rego (1968), capoeira was for a long time seen as a problem to be dealt with by the police, “who spent every waking moment in pursuit of the capoeiras” (p. 43). Some of the more consistent studies on the history of capoeira were carried out based on documentation contained in Brazilian police files. See Pires (1996) and Soares (1994 and 2001).

(4) Mestre Pastinha (1889-1981) is the primary figure in Capoeira Angola, who in 1941 founded the Capoeira de Angola Sports and Cultural Center in Salvador, Bahia, in 1941. He went to his grave blind and forgotten. Mestre Bimba (1899 – 1974) started Brazil’s first capoeira Academy and was creator of Capoeira Regional, an internationally recognized capoeira style. He died in poverty, always struggling for better living conditions, in Goiânia, Goiás. Mestre Valdemar da Liberdade managed a capoeira circle every Sunday during the 1940s and 50s, which became the most important meeting place for capoeiras in Salvador. This is where Brazilian writer Jorge Amado and photographer Pierre Verger “drew cultural sustenance” (ABREU, 2003, p. 43). He died in poverty in 1990, like so many other celebrated capoeiras.

are regarded as the pillars of capoeira, in the eyes of new generations, those great men were victimized by a pattern of exploitation none care to repeat.

**The Globalization of Capoeira: from Symbol of Brazilian Identity, to the Cultural Heritage of All Mankind.** When Brazilian capoeira adepts began leaving the country in large numbers in the early 1970s, they had plans to “conquer the world” and find work among folklore artists abroad. In their simple quest for a livelihood and recognition, they had no inkling of the colossal dimensions to which the phenomenon would grow over the next three decades. Nothing came easily to them, and the streets were often the only places in which they could express their art or establish contact with other performers in similar venues – typically tumblers and jugglers of uncertain origin. They managed, in the larger cities of the United States and Europe, to draw attention to this “tropical art,” and influenced other street culture movements, among them breakdancing. Breakdancing blossomed in the United States during the 1980s and quickly spread throughout the world. Its stop-and-go dance routines interspersed with startling acrobatics clearly include a host of techniques taken from capoeira, such as the headspin (*pião de cabeça*).

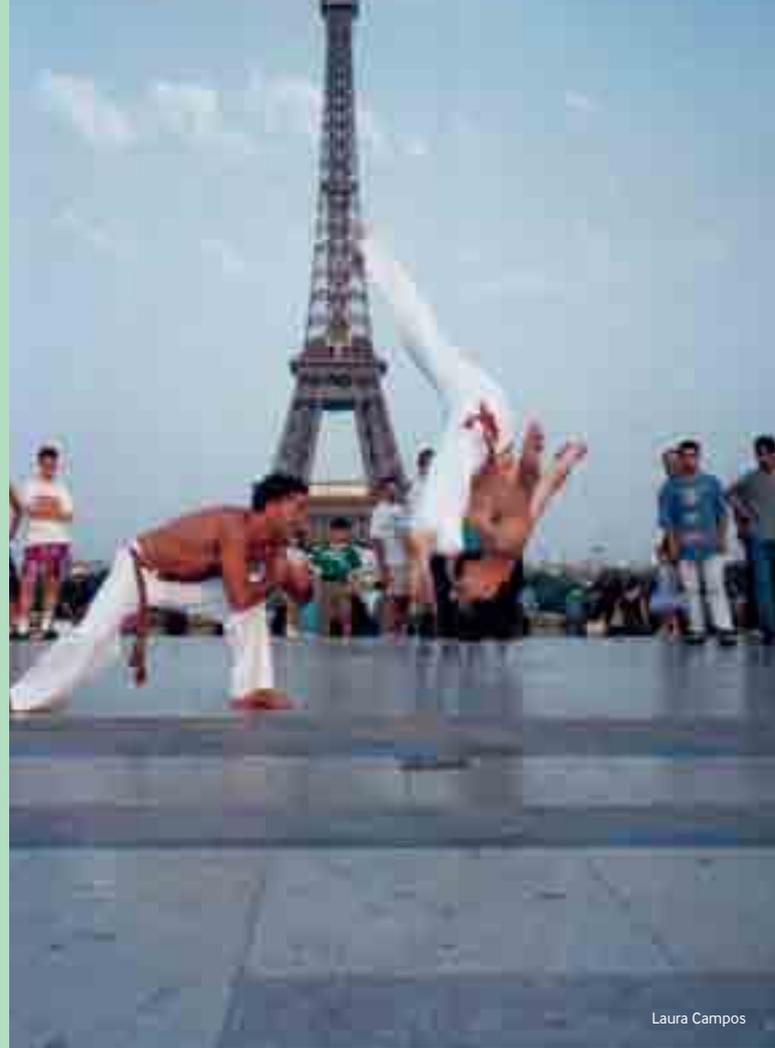
Brazilian capoeira practitioners in New York met regularly at parks and boulevards, often appearing on TV documentaries and in cultural extravaganzas. A 1989 *Jornal do Brasil* article titled “Capoeira for Americans” heralded this transformation in its early stages.

*Transplanted by Brazilians in the USA, capoeira is increasingly popular and shows up in nightclub acts, exhibitions, contests, schools and even movies (...). Like American jazz in its early days, capoeira (...) is a beat, a swing, something throbbing with motion. It is a way people move, think and behave at capoeira and in their daily lives. (WEELock, 1989, p. 8).*

All of this raises an important question. What aspects of this departing wave of capoeira practitioners made the most valuable contributions toward the global popularization and uplifting of capoeira?

The primary reasons for the exodus of capoeira mestres, teachers and adepts overseas are largely a matter of economics, along with a desire for recognition and prestige. The payscale for teaching capoeira in Brazil is relatively low, whereas in major European and American cities it is much higher.

This expansion overseas has had an unprecedented impact on capoeira. To some, it beckons seductively, while to others it is a source of misgivings about the “maintenance” of honored traditions. There are many who argue that this sort of expansion moves us away from the principles



Laura Campos

and values that have made capoeira a form of “resistance fighting” against exploitation. Others believe this process is contributing toward fostering an increased appreciation of African cultural marks even as it intensifies interest in Brazil and Brazilian culture.

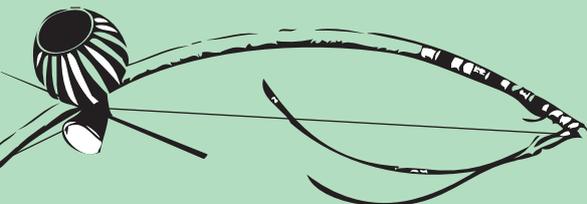
Many authors claim that capoeira in the USA also helps strengthen the ties between African-Americans and their African roots – stretched nearly to the breaking point by the violence attending centuries of segregation. This is enough to bring many Americans to Brazil to “see firsthand” and find out about the mestres, who best represent this dance-fighting form. A number of establishments in the city of Salvador, considered the “Mecca of Capoeira,” have practically become shrines to capoeira pilgrims from all over the world; examples include the *Academia de João Pequeno*,<sup>5</sup> in the borough of Forte Santo Antônio, or the *Fundação Mestre Bimba*, in Pelourinho.

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(5) Mestre João Pequeno is, at age 89, Brazil’s oldest working capoeira instructor in 2007. On December 18, 2003, he was granted an honorary doctorate by the Federal University of Uberlândia in Minas Gerais.

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We should bear in mind that this interest among foreigners to learn more about capoeira also kindles in them the desire to get to know Brazil and learn Portuguese. Many mestres and teachers giving classes overseas make a point of conducting their training in Portuguese to add the appeal of “tradition.” In their zeal for an identity based on Afro-Brazilian traditions, many instructors go so far as to ban translations of the names of techniques, song lyrics and even the names of capoeira instruments. Speaking Portuguese at capoeira classes is a requirement that acts as a kind of “seal of approval.” This, surprisingly enough, has opened up unexpected job opportunities. Hunter College, one of New York’s most traditional schools, now offers regular courses in Portuguese in response to the demand generated by capoeira. (NUNES, 2001, p. 3).

By way of contrast we have Mestre João Grande, a former gas station attendant who settled in New York over 10 years ago and was granted a doctorate *Honoris Causa* from Upsala College of New Jersey in 1996. He teaches his classes at an Academy in the West Village in authentic *baiano* Portuguese. Then again, many workshops are translated into foreign languages (mainly English) right here in Brazil. This is the case with “Capoeirando,” a summer event strategically organized by famous mestres near tourist hotspots in Brazil. It attracts a large number of foreigners in search of “authentic” Brazilian capoeira.

In this complex give-and-take of globalization, capoeira has been gaining adherents in the most remote of outer reaches. Movies and the Internet have contributed to this process. The first of these was *The Given Word* (O Pagador de Promessas), winner of several international awards. But American productions such as *Only the Strong Survive* and *Roof Tops*, really made the difference when it came to popularizing the martial form.

The worldwide expansion of capoeira is most easily seen in the United States and Europe. Aside from isolated attempts to “give back” this fighting style in Africa, most efforts are currently targeting the so-called developed countries.

The fact of the matter is that capoeira has conquered the world and become one of the most important exponents of Brazilian culture abroad; it is exuberant propaganda for Brazil. By 2003 there were capoeira schools in all 50 states – 15 in New York alone. What is more surprising is that demand for capoeira lessons stateside is concentrated primarily in public schools. This martial arts form has established a reputation for helping to build up self-esteem and trust in youngsters who have learning disabilities or poor

(6) Large capoeira groups conduct international meets every year, and attract mestres and adepts from many countries. One of these is the Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira, (Abada-Capoeira), an organization that brings together over 30,000 capoeiras from 26 countries.

social skills. It is therefore a “reentry gate” for young people victimized by violence or troubled by drug or alcohol problems. (NUNES, 2001). The movie, *Only the Strong Survive*, examines those possibilities.

Public schools, however, are not the only venue in which capoeira has been successful with Americans. It is also used as training, to prepare actors and actresses for roles in action films. That was the case with Halle Berry, who played the lead role in *Catwoman*. The director felt that capoeira moves were not only impressive, but also had that swing. “Americans are very attracted to capoeira, for it can be [...] a form of personal defense, and also a good workout. It is exotic, and people who practice it convey a certain charm.” (BERGAMO, 2004, p. 58). Other Hollywood movies have included capoeira scenes, among them, *Meet the Fockers* (2004), *Ocean’s Twelve* (2004), *The Rundown*, *The Quest*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Batman*.

Video games such as *Tekken 3, 4 & 5*, *Eternal Champions*, *Dark Resurrection*, *Street Fighter III*, *Fatal Fury*, *Rage of the Dragons*, *World of Warcraft*, *Bust a Groove*, *Pokémon Hitmontop*, *The Matrix*, *WWE Smackdown!* and *Here Comes the Pain*, have also contributed to the popularizing of capoeira worldwide.

As a result of this process, certain “colors” held high and stoutly defended in the past, such as oral tradition, improvisation, sly “mandinga” strategies and the culture of resistance, have all been deemphasized in favor of other categories more “in tune” with the moment, such as “ethnic merchandising,” “free-spiritedness,” “working out,” “extravaganzas,” and so forth. (VASSALLO, 2003b).

**Significant Examples of Capoeira Abroad.** Important research and teaching institutions, especially Colleges of Physical Education, see capoeira as an extracurricular activity. There are, at some of them, systematic capoeira programs organized as extension projects, at which Brazilian teachers are hired for a specific period to teach interested parties. That is the pattern for the *Estádio Universitário* at the University of Lisbon, the University of Warsaw, University of Oslo, University of Bristol and the Technical University of Lisbon.

Capoeira events international in scope are held at many places worldwide. These events allow for quite a bit of interchange and give-and-take among the various approaches to the presentation of capoeira.

Although capoeira experts from Brazil have put on extravaganzas in different parts of Europe since 1951, the systematic teaching of capoeira in the Old World was first taken up in 1971 by the well-known Mestre Nestor Capoeira,<sup>7</sup> at the London School of Contemporary Dance, in London, England.

The capoeira movement in Europe has gained considerable momentum over the past 30 years, so that it is now fairly well-developed. At the outset, however, the most seri-



■ A capoeira workshop in Oslo, Norway – 08/16/03 (J.L.C. Falcão)

ous obstacle was lack of information as to what this mixture of martial dance-fighting was all about.

After having spent 14 years in Portugal, Mestre Umoi recalled that at first he had to conduct classes on the streets to interest youngsters in capoeira. He told them he was going to teach them to “do some kicks.” He claims he had to resort to this dodge to get the “wee ones” interested in these “leg kicks from Brazil.”

*When I arrived here, in August of 1990, there was no capoeira – at least not in the Greater Lisbon area, which is where I lived. Nobody knew what capoeira was, and my whole purpose in coming over here was to teach capoeira. So I began by approaching some of the academies over here and their immediate reaction was to tell me they had no use for chicken coops – and here in Portugal, capoeira means of sort of chicken coop. That made it a lot harder to get started working here. (Mestre Umoi, personal correspondence, June 27, 2003).<sup>8</sup>*

The dedicated work and commitment of many mestres and instructors made it possible to build on the initiative of Nestor Capoeira, so that this particular style could gain traction, diversity, a place in the sun and prestige in Old World society.

The traction it gained in Europe came from the fabulous cultural heritage that forms the core of its songs, movements and background. These are the features that

(7) Nestor Capoeira was a student of Mestre Leopoldina, and a red-rope graduate of Grupo Senzala in 1969. He has written many books and articles on capoeira. He took his master’s and doctorate in Communications and Culture from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He played the lead role in the Embrafilme-produced movie titled “Cordão de Ouro,” (now available in video from Globovídeo). The movie was directed by A. C. Fontoura, in 1978.

(8) This testimonial and others in this article were taken during the author’s Doctoral Internship, in Europe, from April through August of 2003. They were used as source material for writing Chapter 4 of the Doctoral thesis titled: *O Jogo da Capoeira em Jogo e a Construção da Práxis Capoeirana* (FALCÃO, 2004).

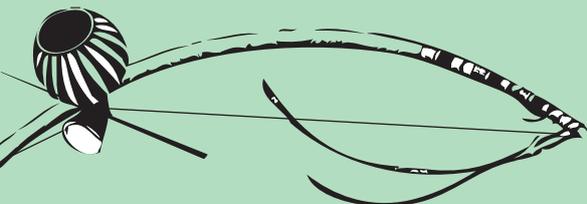
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combine to erect a veritable edifice of Brazilian identity atop a foundation of *baiano* origins; an edifice somewhat idealized, to the extent that it glosses over cultural and economic differences clearly present in Brazil. The fact remains that this mobility, this movement of capoeira experts – from cities all over Brazil to the Old World and North America – helps familiarize people with the style, the cultural marks of which amount to a stamped impression of Brazilian national origin. One Norwegian instructor asserts that: “nowadays, people are quite familiar with what capoeira is, and it is capoeira they want (...). Folks in search of capoeira already have an idea that it is something Brazilian, and that’s what they’re after!” (Professor Torcha, personal correspondence, Oslo, Norway, October 18, 2003).

Capoeira, true enough, has grown tremendously, bringing with it this “stamp” of Brazil inherent in its songs and movements. It is currently a way of bringing together people from everywhere on Earth, thereby acquiring a supranational identity. Mestre Umoi also says:

*Capoeira is transposing the oceanic barrier that separates Brazil, Africa, Europe and North America. Capoeira belongs to capoeiristas, and we have quite a number of good capoeiristas here in Europe. You’ll find a lot of Germans playing capoeira Angola as well as – or even better than – many capoeiristas who have never been outside of Salvador, or never left Brazil. So what will you say to that? Is it because they’re German? No. It’s because they are capoeiristas. (Mestre Umoi, personal correspondence, Amsterdam, August 18, 2003).*

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**Brazilian Capoeira Teachers: Their Experiences in Europe.** Most of the capoeira mestres and instructors working in Europe are from the northeastern part of Brazil, especially the cities of Recife and Salvador. But there are other instructors as well, from practically every state in Brazil, teaching this style in the Old World.

Capoeiras from many groups in Brazil have been moving to Paris since the early 1970s. Úrsula, who settled in France over a dozen years ago, claims that when she arrived there, very few people knew about capoeira. Nowadays, in spite of a few poorly-trained individuals claiming to be mestres without having gone to any academy, capoeira is very popular. It is not at all uncommon for “women to outnumber the men in classes.” (CARVALHO, 2002, p. 17).

This occupation of teaching capoeira abroad, which engages many Brazilians with or without proper papers, is very different indeed from conventional employment with regular hours – the sort of thing that, until recently, we thought of as working at a job.

Yet these are the very real opportunities that turn up, and young capoeira professionals “fight tooth and nail” for those positions, regarded as great adventures. Unsteady as they may seem, these type of job opportunities often work out. They not only provide a livelihood for most of these far-flung, expatriate “professionals,” but also help to serve up capoeira seasoned with healthy doses of randomness and improvisation.

The struggle to survive and the desire for the recognition to be gained from new experience, those are the primary reasons so many capoeira instructors leave Brazil for the uncertain promise of a “good life” abroad. What they often find, however, are scattered and unpredictable work opportunities. They typically work as freelancers, as an alternative way to “make a living.”

The arrival of capoeira instructors in Europe is usually full of surprises. What follows is a statement by Mestre Matias, of Minas Gerais, who moved to Switzerland in 1989 and currently works in many cities in that country. His experience echoes that of many other mestres and instructors, outward bound in search of better opportunities.

*My arrival in Switzerland was really tough, I scraped for a living, played berimbau in the snow, at train stations, you see, because none of the capoeiristas there would form a street circle. I went to the street by myself, sometimes playing my berimbau. I would do some leaps, some nutty stuff, it was also a way of getting myself free. The berimbau was my companion. It was a way to escape the anguish, the homesickness, wishing to be back in Brazil, among my students and colleagues. That is one cold country. It is a rude awakening when you arrive and don't know anyone, not even the language. So I went through some very tough times, but, thank the Lord, I overcame all that, and today I'm not going to tell you I speak perfect German, but I speak it well enough. (Mestre Matias, personal correspondence, Madrid, Spain, June 29, 2003).*

The bottom line is that although desperate situations, and even deportations, are not uncommon, some capoeira teachers perceive a possibility of earning overseas the status and recognition they would not easily obtain in Brazil. “I’m a bird,” “nobody can stop me,” “I feel like I’m already there,” were heady sayings, often tossed off in Portugal by a strong-willed teacher from Recife. He has been living a life of high adventure, with many ups and downs, often clouded by uncertainty, but artfully, and with infectious good cheer.

The hurdles in the way of finding a steady job with benefits lead many capoeira instructors in Europe – burdened with uncomfortable immigrant status – to “get by” working odd hours at dangerous and dirty jobs until such time as



■ A capoeira roda in a public square - Oslo, Norway – 08/16/03 (J.L.C. Falcão)

they are able to obtain legitimate, legal and formal employment. And so it is, in fits and starts, that they work along tortuous and unpredictable career paths in a struggle for upward mobility and social acceptance.

Their dreams and yearnings constantly entwined with fear and worry, these instructors have been opening up new horizons in the field of informal education – education that is growing ever more popular with society at large, especially among those lacking in purchasing power. Mestre Umoi, speaking from experience, brings this home:

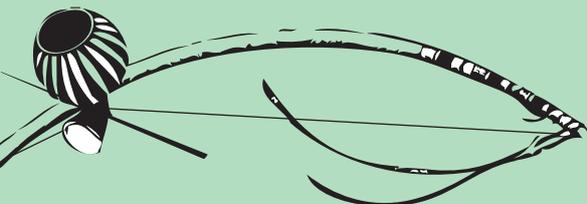
*The idea of social work is one that stirs me deeply. I've always worked on the fringes, around the borough of Sobradinho, in Brasília, and it was no different here. (...) I began as an intern at a reform school in Caxias, off the Cascais Railroad Line, a correction center. It is much like a prison for minors. It was tough work, with lots of African students and lots of Portuguese students – and there were even racial rivalries. I approached the institution with my proposal for an internship. Fortunately the director had spent 20 years in Brazil. As a result, she knew about capoeira and, when she read my proposal, knew it had nothing to do with chickens or chicken coops – which was a real good thing. She hired me as an intern. After the internship I was given a job, and at the close of the classes I was giving, was hired by the Ministry of Justice, where I work to this day. (Mestre Umoi, personal communication, Lisbon, Portugal, June 27, 2003).*

We must bear in mind that capoeira instructors who left Brazil to work in Europe were in a much less uncomfortable situation than other immigrants, since they were not competing with the “natives” for jobs. In the end, they gained

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prestige and recognition to the extent that they possessed certain skills, had command of a specialty that was *made in Brazil*, which amounted to a seal of approval very much sought after by young Europeans. These instructors therefore have “exotic” and “cultural” knowledge, the likes of which, in a way, challenges traditional thinking about entering into a job market – to the extent of redefining the word *job*, currently fraught with turbulence and instability.

In the struggle for survival, these young instructors put their improvisational skills to work coming up with atypical sources of income. Many of them establish intricate mutual support networks, through their many contacts acquired at events, workshops, parties or even paying visits to where their fellow immigrant-capoeiras are performing their own “work.” Groups seen as rivals or competitors in Brazil tend to minimize or work around their rivalries, the better to cope with the *travails* all immigrants from Brazil must face.

These alternative ways of working with capoeira may include presentations at theaters, putting on workshops at schools or colleges, or providing guidance to at-risk youngsters. To a capoeira professional in Europe, opportunities to work are often haphazard and fleeting. Occasional sales of capoeira gear and supplies help boost the budgets of these impecunious pioneers.

Nevertheless, the great majority of these Brazilian instructors derive a sense of personal worth from working with capoeira in foreign countries. After all, these fearless adventurers are well aware that they are the legitimate purveyors of a culture deemed “exotic,” and an endless source of fascination to foreigners.

Many of these teachers manage to acquire some security through agreements with established public and private sector institutions. One mestre working in Portugal explained that, during an event in Norway, he felt very appreciated as a “capoeira teacher” at a public institution.

Another common thread in the experiences of many Brazilian capoeiras in Europe has to do with the way these



■ Street vendor of capoeira, instruments and apparel – Event in Madrid, Spain, June 2003 (J.L.C. Falcão)

cultural demonstrations – through their competitive events – bring together people from all social strata under a single roof. Generally speaking, a mestre or teacher will alternate between performing in nice surroundings and doing “social work.” During weekends, or at these events, the people who call these various workplaces their own get together to enjoy lively capoeira *rodas*.

Mestre Barão’s capoeira classes take him into starkly contrasting neighborhoods in the City of Porto, in northern Portugal.

*I teach in the borough of Lagarteiro, a neighborhood with a lot of problems. It is a tenement section the people around there call Hell. I also teach Gypsies in another tenement neighborhood in Porto... it is social work. After I leave these slums, I go to a gymnasium where only wealthy businessmen go to train. (Mestre Barão, personal correspondence, June 8, 2003).*

This art of living – oftentimes of surviving as an immigrant by and for capoeira – doesn’t always lead to success stories. It does, however, call attention to productive teaching experiences in the field of informal education, experiences that intersect with, and often complement the formal education process.

As part of the current of globalization, capoeira, a thoroughgoing cultural manifestation, is steadily holding its own, while mestres and instructors “teach” the “fundamentals” to people of vastly different cultures and origins, thereby helping to do away with taboos and stereotypes built up during its own historical rise. If capoeira were “Brazilian,” and “in our blood,” how is it taught to people with no Brazilian blood in their veins? Travassos (1999, p. 266) asks: “How could you teach something written in the blood, minds and bodies of some, but not others?”

There are many capoeira adepts in Europe who – besides exhaustively dedicating themselves to the style – develop an interest in other arts and forms found within Brazil’s “cultural holdings,” such as the frevo, samba, maculelê and maracatu, and fall in love with Brazil. This is clear in a statement by an instructor teaching in Lisbon: “Many Europeans are more intensely dedicated to capoeira than a lot of Brazilians, and really have Brazil in their hearts.” (Professor Marco Antônio, personal correspondence, Lisbon, Portugal, August 13, 2003).

As countless non-Brazilian instructors complete their training, capoeira encounters and incorporates new elements into its “fundamentals.” In this evolving process, those fundamentals are constantly rewritten in bouts and competitions in which economics, culture and subjective factors play their parts.

Mestre Borracha, who has been in Europe since 1985, told us in an interview about the first European capoeira



■ A capoeira workshop in Warsaw University, Poland. May 2003 (J.L.C. Falcão)

master, Mestre Coruja. After dedicating 20 years to his art, this Italian mestre completed his training under Mestre Canela, of Rio de Janeiro’s Grupo Mangagá. This points to the need to peer deeper into this unfolding context, one that is sure to contribute immensely toward a rethinking of the entire capoeira phenomenon from a broader and subtler perspective.

We do know that there’s a certain amount of discounting on the part of Brazilian mestres and instructors – and even practitioners – with regard to non-Brazilian instructors; so these instructors feel a sort of additional responsibility to better their grasp of the fundamentals of capoeira. The dilemma is amply illustrated in a statement by an instructor who teaches at the University of Lisbon’s College of Human Movement:

*Simply because I am not Brazilian, I feel I have to prove something extra. Before they see me practice or sing, people expect I’m going to swallow all my vowels, or perform a mediocre capoeira. I’ve been to many places where they didn’t deign to introduce me as an instructor, but simply as Arroz Doce, from Portugal. As to the way I stack up against others, however, I see that once the circle gets moving, they forget all about that. Brazilian or European, capoeira is capoeira, and a roda is a roda. I resonate with it, so to speak, more than a lot of Brazilians. This is a very important part of my life. (Professor Arroz Doce, personal correspondence, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, November 26, 2003).*

Our analysis of this intricate and involved movement toward the globalization of capoeira leads us to jot down three basic observations: A) Over the past 10 years capoeira has solidly established itself and gained visibility and symbolism to the point where it is now one of Brazil’s foremost picture postcards abroad. B) The emotions shared and sig-

Capoeira may very well be “our own” Brazilian thing, but to the extent that it can also be taught, practiced, transmitted, constructed, shared, imparted and multiplied, it also belongs to the world.



■ Street roda – Carminignano di Brenta, Italy. July 2003 (J.L.C. Falcão)

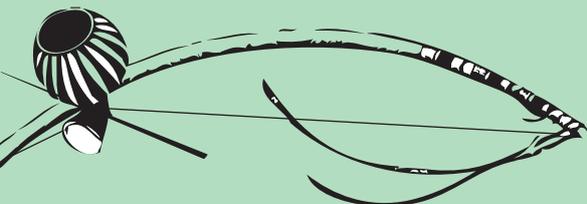
nificance learned through its practice are closely bound up with the intensity of the practice and the exuberance of the experience. Capoeira glitters, multifaceted, teaching ethical, cultural, political, historical and economic aspects of life in human society. Finally, C) Capoeira is subject to the same sort of division into social strata as a society with its classes, yet expresses itself in many different ways, much like the classes within the stratified society in which it is practiced.

**Closing Remarks.** Our survey of the systemic aspects of capoeira abroad have moved us to reflect on the possibilities that this symbol of Brazilian-ness – that is enchanting foreigners in rapidly mounting numbers – opens up for us. It is clear from our observations that capoeira has consolidated itself as an trans-ethnic phenomenon. Furthermore, its rapid global expansion since the 1970s has not crowded political actors out of the field of culture, but rather, issued them new challenges.

Much of the experience gained with capoeira overseas has confirmed and even emphasized those transnational features that so contributed to its development. As a corollary, it has rattled to their foundations all arguments urging that this is a practice better suited to certain layers of the populace, and associated with easily identifiable ethnic groups.

The complex and dynamic nature of capoeira reveals itself in its accelerating process of globalization. It is expanding horizontally, down the pathways and folkways of capoeiras throughout the world, and vertically, through its demonstrated capacity to permeate different social strata. Although we still hear it repeated that this is something of “our own,” which, if true, would make Brazilians the exclusive purveyors of its “mandinga,” the experience we’ve documented here shows that this line of reasoning is most easily couched in terms of conflict and ambiguity. Capoeira may very well be “our own” Brazilian thing, but to the extent that it can also be taught, practiced, transmitted, constructed, shared, imparted and multiplied, it also belongs to the world.

## THE GLOBALIZATION OF CAPOEIRA



Capoeira can be interpreted according to social mores and values. As a social construct, and as a cultural manifestation constantly building upon itself, capoeira is influenced by the historical context that surrounds it. Still, it is also built on the interests and actions of the people who make use of it for doing and getting things done in society.

Although quite a number of its adepts treat capoeira as an ethnic symbol (capoeira is Brazilian! African! Afro-Brazilian!), its increasing globalization leads us to think of it as something clothed in the cultural heritage of mankind. From that standpoint it would have no country, though loaded down with symbols of its unquestionable Brazilian origins.

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