

The African Origin of Capoeira

by

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I first became aware of the existence of the truly remarkable martial art of Capoeira in 1967 after having received a Fulbright Grant to study Brazilian culture and language in Brazil. I was originally assigned to study in Recife, Pernambuco; but after a short visit to Salvador da Bahia during one of the frequent university strikes, I requested a transfer to the university located in Bahia.

The main reason for this request was my initial exposure to Capoeira, where I witnessed João Grande spinning around on his head during one of the exhibition matches and his heading of Raimundo Pequeno who was propelled over the heads of a row of gawking tourists that were seated upon benches. I was enthralled not only by the beauty of the movements and the captivating rhythms, but also by the fact that this was a Black art form said to have had its origins in Angola, Africa.

That performance and further contact with the art - first as a student of Mestre Pastinha and then subsequent contact and participation with other groups headed by the late Mestre Caiçara, the late Mestre Bimba, Mestre Gato, Mestre Roque (Pavãozinho, Rio) and the Grupo Senzala from Rio - left a lasting impression which continues to this day.

After several years full of adventure had passed, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin majoring in African Languages and Literature with a specialization in Hausa. Although I applied for a grant to do research for my Ph.D. dissertation on martial arts in Angola, that application was summarily declined. Thus Dr. Kenneth Dossar – a member of the ICAF

(International Federation of Capoeira Angola) Board of Directors who wrote his doctoral dissertation dealing with Capoeira - was able to beat me to the punch.

I eventually ended up going to Nigeria as a lecturer / researcher in the Department of Nigerian Languages in Kano, Nigeria (1981 – 1983) and, while there, was exposed to a number of forms of traditional Hausa martial arts including *dambe* (a kind of boxing), *shanci* (wristlet fighting), *kokawa* (a kind of wrestling), *sharo* (Fulani stick-flogging), *tauri* (toughskin competitions), *farauta* (hunting expeditions), etc. Upon returning to the US, I wrote and defended my doctoral dissertation dealing with Hausa Combat Literature (drum calls, recitations, songs) in 1984.

Ten years later, I wrote a companion volume to the dissertation entitled Hausa Combat Games . This was the first volume in a series of books dealing with Black Martial Arts. The second book in that series dealt with Morengy (2001), and the third (but referred to as the fourth) dealt with Northern Nguni Stick-fighting (2002).

I had intentionally put off the writing and publication of the book dealing with Capoeira until I had the opportunity to visit Angola - a visit that I argued would have to await the termination of belligerence in the interior of that war-torn nation.

In 1992 I went to Madagascar and the Indian Ocean where I discovered that these people, too, had a rich tradition of martial arts said to have come from Africa. Of particular interest to us here are early newspaper descriptions of a martial art form of Reunion called Moringue, some excerpts of which I have translated into English and present below:

(1894) It's sad! Every Sunday afternoon, the *Petite-Ile* neighborhood is, apparently, home to various savage competitions ... [that is] Le Moring, a boxing competition, with kicks and head blows;

(1902) The strange name of Moringue is used to describe an idiotic and brutal game where, under the pretext of physical exercise, the future voters of the city of St-Denis deliver ram-

like head blows, punches, kicks, and other blows (known and unknown). Sometimes blood flows and a champion is badly bruised. Spectators form a circle around the adversaries and three or four musicians beat out rhythms on the drums. They have now chosen a place near Chateau Morange to play their games on Sunday afternoons.

Sounds something like Capoeira, doesn't it? The description continues: Each neighborhood had its champions and special techniques. Camp Giron was known for its heel kicks; Rue des Sables was known for its head butts (said to be capable of uprooting a tree); Lataniers was known for its kicking, etc.

At that point in history moringue champions were heroes. Among the most popular of these were: **Laurent-le-diable** ("Lawrence the devil"), **Le Rempart du Camp Ozoux** ("the mountain wall of Camp Ozoux"), **La Terreur des Lataniers** ("The Terror of Lataniers"), **Coco l'enfer** ("the coconut of hell"), **Cadine** (the best-known), **Bibi l'invincible** (Bibi the invincible from Petite-Ile), and **Chou-fleur** ("Cauliflower") all of whom (like their Capoeira counterparts) were feared and respected fighters imbued with supposed supernatural powers.

A number of researchers (both within Reunion and outside of it) have concluded that the art of Moringue is a ritual combat of Malagasy and African origin which was practiced in Reunion from the beginnings of slavery until the early 1950s. The source of the art, they assert, is undoubtedly Africa (Mozambique, Angola, East African Coast, Congo, Dahomey, etc.) which had many martial art forms.

These traditions were carried to Madagascar (in the form of *Morengy*), to Brazil (in the form of *Capoeira*), to Martinique (in the form of *Danmyé, Ladjia, Kokoye, & Ronpoin*), to Cuba (as *Bombosa < Mani*) and to Guadeloupe ("*Chat ou*") by enslaved Africans from various parts of the continent. An excellent introduction to the Dahomean origins of Ladjia - *Le Ladjia Origines et Pratiques* - was written by Josy Michelon (a black dance instructor from Martinique).

After having been exposed to this and other African martial arts, I am more convinced than ever that Capoeira came to Brazil from Africa in a more or less developed form and that it underwent some modifications over the centuries, just as Brazilian Portuguese, for example, is a modified form of continental Portuguese. This is not a “racist” position but rather a simple fact. Saying that capoeira originated in Brazil is tantamount to saying that Black Americans originated in a plantation setting somewhere in the deep south. Or as Stokely Carmichael put it “popped up in a toaster in Mississippi”.

Brazilians seem to have no problem in recognizing that the Portuguese language and their Catholic faith were acquisitions from Portugal, why should they be so reluctant to recognize the African origins of Capoeira? Why must they insist that it originated (though be it with the slaves) on Brazilian soil. The African, after all, did not come to Brazil without a culture. This is evidenced, even today, by the strength and proliferation of Candomblé and Macumba in Brazil. If important elements of African religion survived, why is it so untenable that their martial art forms did not?

The point being made here is that since there were and still are many original and highly developed forms of African martial arts, why should the enslaved Africans who came to Brazil remember the religious aspect of his culture, but not the physical combat tradition which was (in all probability) intimately linked with it. Contrary to Edison Carneiro’s description of the art in Capoeira Sem Mestre, the African did not have to become “whitened” to be able to execute an ideal cartwheel or flip.

You might ask at this point, just what is the specific resemblance between Capoeira and other African martial arts traditions. Some similarities include: 1) the use of three drums [Although Capoeira now employs 3 berimbaus, the drums (and not the berimbaus) were

used when Pastinha learned it from his African teacher.]; 2) the battle circle; 3) the fact that music and choral songs occur during the competition; 4) the type of blows; 5) certain preparational performance rituals; 6) the use of magic; 7) the use of war names; etc.

In the *Moring* of Reunion (as in the *Morengy* of Madagascar and the *Mrengé* of the Comoros), for instance, a competitor emerges from the crowd and (as a group of musicians plays drums) provokes a potential adversary with a fist challenge. Someone then accepts the challenge and a ritual dance is performed in which the adversaries execute a characteristic strut around the circle formed by the spectators. The combatants then perform a ritual consisting of squatting and caressing the earth with their hands, and rubbing their hands and bodies with dirt (somewhat similar to the actions of the Capoeira combatants squatting before the berimbau). Combat then begins to the rhythm of the drumming. For more detailed information and photos dealing with: 1) *morengy*; 2) a number of combat games from Nigeria; and 3) stick-fighting from South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe, see the other three books that I have already published in this series.

After my intended trip to Angola (possibly in the year 2016) I hope to discover the “smoking gun” which will convince even the biggest skeptic of the Angolan origins of capoeira. Until then, the above-cited argument plus the fact that Bimba’s, Pastinha’s and Besouro’s teachers were Africans from Africa were deemed sufficient to support my contention that “*A Capoeira veio da Africa*” (Capoeira came from Africa) and that “*Foi o Africano quem mandou* (it was the African who sent it there).

Recently (March, 2014), however, the possible philosophical underpinnings of Capoeira were revealed to me in a flash of intuition. Indeed, if Africa was the land of the origins of Capoeira it must have originated within the community of hunters, trappers and

blacksmiths because these were the warriors of the village who defended it from external aggression.

The main difference between Capoeira and other martial arts is that Capoeira is essentially defensive and that it is characterized by three movements: evasion; arming a trap; and springing the trap in that order. This, in essence, is the art of the hunter. It would be unthinkable for an unarmed man to face a lion and try to subdue it with his bare hands. Even more unimaginable, would be to face a charging elephant and try to deflect its charge with the body.

However, among the Masai, a young warrior is expected to prove his manhood by killing a lion armed only with a spear. To do this, he approaches the lion, provokes it and then when it charges falls backwards to the ground. At the point when lion leaps upon him, he raises his prone spear and the lion falls with its full weight upon the point of the spear thus meeting its death. Once it leaps it can not alter its trajectory in space even when it sees that a spear point awaits it.

Capoeira, in essence, is comprised of 8 traps with multiple releases, all of which can be compared to various traps used by African hunters to trap birds and larger animals. Even, the characteristic ginga is a trap because stepping one leg back (in the evasion of a knife thrust) is like cocking the trigger of a pistol which “when brought forward with force” delivers a traumatic blow to the groin of the adversary. Note how the black smith intuits this in raising his hammer high before striking to temper the iron weapon he is fabricating.

The capoeirista fights low to the ground because he must somehow avoid the thrust of the larger animal and attacking primarily its legs and feet (cf. the importance of the rasteira).

Also it is more advantageous to be below the vital spot of the animal to kill it or deliver a traumatizing blow.

Even malicia can be understood in the light of hunting. For malicia (dissimulation) is very much like covering a hole made to trap an elephant with branches and leaves. When a capoeirista executes a “baianada”, he does so by first pretending to drop a coin and then when bent over rapidly pulls the adversary’s feet from beneath him.

This, in my view, is a much better explanation, than the Brazilian one that posits that the reason why the capoeirista fights with his feet is that his hands are in chains. Indeed, in reality the slave also had shackles on his feet. It also is much more appealing than T. J. Desch’s “crossing the kalunga” notion.

Nestor Capoeira’s explanation of how Capoeira came to be (a pinch of this and a pinch of that from multiple sources including Native Americans, whites, Asians and Africans) is unsustainable and at some points even ludicrous.

There is a saying in Hausa: “Nagari na Kowa” (The good boy belongs to everyone). That is, if a person is worthwhile all will rush to claim a relationship with him: “I am his father; I am his cousin; I am from his lineage; I am from his village; etc.” Thus it is, that now that Capoeira has been elevated to the status it presently enjoys, Brazilians (of all hues) wish to claim it as exclusively theirs and denying its African origin. This despite the fact that in the past it was not only frowned upon, but despised, persecuted and banned.

Mestre Pastinha always taught that Capoeira is not a “privilegio” (privilege) of anyone and that all are welcome to learn it: *homen, menino, mulher* (men, women or children), black or

white, rich or poor. And indeed Capoeira now has evolved from being the exclusive patrimony of Africans, then Afro-Brazilians, then Brazilians for it is indeed international.

The main purpose of this essay, however, is to loudly proclaim, without any reservation, that Capoeira is in essence an African tradition with an underlying African philosophy and that no matter how loudly the Brazilians proclaim that it originated on Brazilian soil, they are on the side of a losing argument. The fact that Capoeira came from Africa can not be denied. While it is true that Capoeira has changed over the ages (and even today continues to change), and that these changes occurred on Brazilian soil, they were not significant enough to change the African nature of Capoeira.

For a complete description of the eight traps and multiple releases of Capoeira see my workhop published in book form in Portuguese and English with the title Elementos Básicos da Capoeira de Angola. For other books in my Black Martial Arts series open my website www.danaikipublications.org . Also for videos and other relevant information go to www.blacfoundation.org (our Foundation website).

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