

Martial Arts, Capoeira, and Sankofa

submitted by Kamau Rashid, Ph.D.

Martial arts, or rather methods of combat, doubtlessly evolved initially informally out of a need to defend human communities and resources. Ahati Kilindi Iyi argues that the martial arts rose in tandem with the demarcation of human settlements as a means of defending communities against human and non-human animal predators.

If we extend this thesis, we might presume that the formalization of combative systems rose in tandem with the increasing complexity of human societies. Thus hunter-gather communities' security needs would be less than horticultural communities,' which would be less than the needs of an agrarian civilization. The incremental movement towards agrarian civilizations, which is essentially an urban society wherein large-scale agricultural production is the major economic and cultural force in society, likely intensified the demands for security. One vitally important feature of this form of society is the development of a sophisticated division of labor, as advancements in agricultural production freed large segments of the population from farming. These members of society were thus free to engage in other necessary social pursuits. Astronomers, architects, doctors, governmental administrators, soldiers, bakers, sculptors, musicians, scholars, priests, and so on are examples of roles that emerged in ancient Kmt (Egypt) as a result of the division of labor.

The unending need to defend the nation-state, and the periodic expansion into an imperial state, necessitated a standing army. It is here where the martial arts were truly born, not simply as informal combatives practiced within small farming communities, but as combat systems with training systems endowed with theoretical frameworks and tactical repertoires. In fact the iconography that is visible via from Kmt offers a fascinating portrait of the martial arts. These evidence a combat system that included a ranged weapon (the bow), contact

weapons (the spear, the stick, the mace, and the sword), and close quarter combat (grappling and striking). This range is highly significant in a number of respects that I will comment on later.

There are some people that argue that hand to hand forms of combat preceded the development of weapons-based combat modalities, but I think that this is unlikely. Human communities have always relied upon tools. Whether hunter-gatherer or post-industrial, humans rely upon their technologies to mediate their survival within their environment. Moreover, ancient hunters typically relied upon tools to fell large prey. Therefore I argue that the application of human tools to the enterprise of hunting likely created the context in which combat forms developed. Empty hand forms of fighting were likely devised within the social arena for a range of functions, including combat. The combat art of N'golo is an example of this. This art was practiced as a combat sport among the Macupe and Mulondo people of present-day Angola. It was a measure of one's fulfillment of the rites of manhood and one's worthiness to marry. The stick-fighting of the Suri people of eastern Africa served and continues to serve a similar role.

Africa is a vast continent with rich combative traditions. The iconography of the Nile Valley makes it an easy example of the emergence of African martial culture. However this does not suggest or diminish the martial traditions of other societies. Whether the sword fighting of the Tuareg, the stick and blade arts of the Zulu, the grappling of the Wolof and so on, Africa is a continent rich in martial culture. It is this richness that flowered the Western hemisphere with combat arts such as Capoeira, Danmye, Kalenda, Knockin' and Kickin', and so forth. These arts were not only a critical bridge to continental African martial culture, they were also tools that informed the struggle for freedom of enslaved Africans--prisoners of war who fought defiantly for their liberty.

Capoeira is a particularly interesting example. It has survived to the present, unlike

many of its counterparts. It has also been globalized, making it the most popular aspect of African martial culture in the world. But Capoeira also reflects a particular malady of the martial arts in the "modern world".

This is an interesting time for the martial arts. Martial arts today reflect a number of distinct developmental goals for their practitioners. These goals include 1) self-defense, 2) physical fitness, 3) kinesthetic beauty, 4) spiritual development, 5) sports competition, and 6) cultural enrichment. Self-defense as a developmental goal consist of the development of combat ability through the martial arts. Many who pursue this goal train in Western Boxing, Muay Thai, Krav Maga, the Filipino martial arts, and so on. Physical fitness consists of the augmentation and maintenance of optimal fitness via martial arts training. Cardio kickboxing and its variants (Cardio Kung Fu, etc.), Capoeira, and other arts often are utilized in pursuit of this goal. Kinesthetic beauty is typically a pursuit reserved for arts whose modalities of motion offers a high degree of visual appeal. Capoeira, Modern Wushu, and others fulfill this function. Some people pursue martial training to cultivate inner-strength, a sense of well-being, a feeling of connectedness to the world around them, and to perfect their character. These would be spiritual pursuits, and Tai Chi Chuan is perhaps the best known example of this. Combat sports provide a medium to subject ones martial knowledge to a high pressure assessment. The popularity of the mixed martial arts, Muay Thai, Western Boxing, and even Judo are all examples of this expression of the martial arts. Lastly, many people envision the martial arts as a vehicle to greater cultural knowledge. Capoeira's popularity among some African Americans is in part due to this function. It should be noted that many of these are traditional pursuits in the martial arts, meaning that they precede the advent of modernity. However the expressions of these is inextricably linked to some of the dominant features in contemporary Western societies, such as the culture of mass consumption, the selective appropriation of non-Western cultures for economic exploitation, and the cultural voyeurism

that this facilitates.

Capoeira is a complex expression of the historical movement of African people into the present. From its predecessors in southwestern and central Africa, to its role in the resistance tradition in Brazil, to its criminalization in the 19th Century, to its popularization among white Brazilians in the 20th Century, to its globalization, and finally to its reclamation among some African Americans as an aspect of their martial heritage, Capoeira mirrors the journey of African people in the "modern world".

Admittedly, I am one of those Africans from the U.S. who was drawn to Capoeira because of its connections to the tradition of African resistance in the Western Hemisphere. I never sought Capoeira to get in shape, or for its kinesthetic beauty, or for the competitive-nature of the roda. I wanted to train in the martial traditions of my ancestors. However this goal was immediately frustrated, because much of Capoeira is not taught as a combat art or science. So my typical trips to Capoeira classes never included things that were staples in my other martial arts training: a coherent combat theory, explicit combat techniques, and training simulations that demonstrated the utility of both of these. The absence of these was for me a perplexing dilemma. It seemed incredulous to me that Capoeira would have garnered such a fierce reputation as an art of resistance in Brazil, as well as an art of the criminal underworld, and yet seem so bereft of combat applicability in terms of how it is often taught. Fortunately my introduction to Capoeira came from someone who was also a fighter--Mestre Preto Velho (Os Malandros dos Mestre Touro), and Tebogo Schultz (via Cordao de Ouro) gave me a foundational body of knowledge that propelled my growth in this art. I sought out others such as Jaiel Omari (Capoeira Akebelan), Da'Mon Stith (Capoeira da Rua), and Mestre Terry Baruti (Adigun Sipho Capoeira Angola). I have also been inspired by the work of Obadele Kambon (Abibifahodie Capoeira in Ghana). All of these groups and individuals confirmed what I had long suspected--Capoeira is indeed a combat art. These successive confirmations

encouraged me along my path.

Today I still do Capoeira. However my path seems to wind ever more closely toward the syncretic. This means that I have been driven to make my Capoeira more comprehensive, more reflective of the range of tactical threats that I seek to anticipate in my training by linking it to other combat traditions.

The Kemetite example that I noted earlier is highly instructive here, as it consisted of several modalities of combat: ranged weapon, contact weapons, and hand-to-hand techniques. I think that this is potentially an ideal template for combat effectiveness, particularly for those whose pursuit of the martial arts is explicitly focused on defense. In my own martial arts training I have attempted to cover each of these domains. I have trained with ranged weapons. I have done various forms of stick and knife fighting (contact weapons). I have also trained in various striking and grappling arts (hand-to-hand techniques).

This framework has also influenced my approach to Capoeira, wherein I have sought to augment the limitations of my training. To this end I cross-train in blade and stick techniques from other traditional and modern African arts, such as Zulu stickfighting. I have also looked at African American boxing arts like 52 Blocks/Jail House Rocks and found a great deal of concordance in its combat principles and Capoeira. Lastly, I have tried to adhere to the type of training framework that I have seen used effectively in other martial arts: a coherent combat theory, combat techniques, and training simulations that demonstrate the utility of both of these. Each of these experiences have enabled me to see the often unarticulated combative principles of Capoeira, and to reflect upon their potential applications.

Months ago I stumbled upon a Youtube video of a Capoeira competition. The video showed people playing each other in pairs, demonstrating spectacular kicks, but never making or attempting to make contact. After about sixty seconds of acrobatic movements the two competitors (not combatants) would be stopped and a winner was declared. To be sure, if

this is what some people want to call Capoeira then so be it. However if there is room under the umbrella of Capoeira for expressions such as these, there should also be room for those who seek to reclaim the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries traditions of Capoeira--the African warrior tradition. Like Zumbi and Besouro, Africans today find themselves in a struggle for freedom, a struggle for dignity. Just as Capoeira steeled their resolve, reinforced their cultural identity, and trained them to defend their communities, I suspect that it offers us some of these same lessons today if only we are willing to choose a different, winding path. A path of struggle and self-determination. Àşę.

References

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