

Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic

Edited by

**Nancy Priscilla Naro,
Roger Sansi-Roca, and
David H. Treece**

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Contents

Contributors

Introduction: The Atlantic, between Scylla and Charybdis
Nancy Priscilla Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca, and David H. Treece

Part I Colonial Formations

Chapter 1
The Fetish in the Lusophone Atlantic
Roger Sansi-Roca

Chapter 2
Kriol without Creoles: Rethinking Guinea's
Afro-Atlantic Connections (Sixteenth to
Twentieth Centuries)
Philip J. Havik

Chapter 3
Historical Roots of Homosexuality in the Lusophone Atlantic
Luiz Mott

Part II Migrations and Colonial Cultures

Chapter 4
Atlantic Microhistories: Mobility, Personal Ties, and
Slaving in the Black Atlantic World (Angola and Brazil)
Roquinaldo Ferreira

Chapter 5
Colonial Aspirations: Connecting Three Points
of the Portuguese Black Atlantic
Nancy Priscilla Naro

Chapter 6
Agudás from Benin: "Brazilian" Identity as a
Bridge to Citizenship
Milton Guran

Chapter 7 Emigration and the Spatial Production of Difference from Cape Verde <i>Kesha D. Fikes</i>	159
Chapter 8 African and Brazilian Altars in Lisbon—Some Considerations on the Reconfigurations of the Portuguese Religious Field <i>Clara Saraiva</i>	175
Part III Hybridity, Multiculturalism, and Racial Politics	
Chapter 9 History and Memory in <i>Capoeira</i> Lyrics from Bahia, Brazil <i>Matthias Röhrig Assunção</i>	199
Chapter 10 The “ <i>Orisha</i> Religion” between Syncretism and Re-Africanization <i>Stefania Capone</i>	219
Chapter 11 Undoing Brazil: Hybridity versus Multiculturalism <i>Peter Fry</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	251

Chapter 9

History and Memory in *Capoeira* Lyrics from Bahia, Brazil

Matthias Röhrig Assunção

Over the last years, British television has shown clips of *capoeira* almost daily. One of the “idents” used by the British Broadcasting Corporation to advertise multiethnic “Cool Britannia” features *capoeira*, and is usually broadcast at prime time just before the ten o’clock news. This is just one example of how globalized *capoeira* has become, and it also demonstrates how much young Brazilians from modest backgrounds and with no formal education can achieve through *capoeira*. Yet *capoeira*’s very success also entails the danger that the art might become just another commodity marketed by global capitalism. *Capoeira* is not just a different type of aerobics or flashy acrobatics accompanied by exotic music. It is a multilayered art form of amazing cultural density, with its own worldview and a history closely linked to that of the African Diaspora. The lyrics are central to the *capoeira* game to stimulate players or to comment on their performance and are thus worth an analysis on their own.

Slaves and freed people widely practiced combat games in late colonial and imperial Brazil. Different modalities, known under the generic name *capoeira*, developed according to both the vicissitudes of the transatlantic and internal slave trades and the local contexts in Pará, Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and other regions. *Capoeira* usually involved some form of mock combat in a circle, the *roda* (ring), accompanied by instruments, hand clapping, and singing. Whilst friendly games were part of slave and popular diversions, rougher games could end in brawls, injuries, and even death.

Throughout the Brazilian Empire (1822–1889), authorities considered that playing *capoeira* was “unacceptable behavior” requiring immediate correction in the form of whipping and forced labor in the Navy dockyards. The Republican Penal Code (1890) outlawed it together with vagrancy. Repression of the *capoeiras*,¹ although brutal, was often unsystematic and inefficient.²

Where and how did *capoeira* originate? This is a question twentieth-century practitioners often raised and still discuss with passion since *capoeira* is paramount to the construction of several identities. Since primary sources referring

to *capoeira* or anything similar in Brazil only extend back to the early nineteenth century, adepts have advanced theories about its origins that suit their particular aspirations and world views. They therefore emphasize either the “Brazilian,” or the “African” character of *capoeira*, and eventually tend to fabricate the appropriate foundational myths.³ The narratives of its origins intersect (though not entirely overlap) with discourses of purity versus miscegenation and these are also paramount to the definition of contemporary styles.

To simplify, we can distinguish three theories. Brazilian nationalists insist that *capoeira* was invented in the Portuguese colonies in America. Authors such as Burlamaqui suggested that runaway slaves, living close to nature in the distant backlands, were inspired by the movements of animals. He therefore concluded that *capoeira* originated entirely within the Brazil environment.⁴ In contrast, Afrocentric theories emphasize the importance of the slaves’ original cultural backgrounds. One theory defends a single African origin of *capoeira* from the Kongo/Angola region (1928: 11–12). A third hypothesis suggests that in Brazil *capoeira* resulted from the amalgamation of different African combat traditions.

In my opinion, at the present state of knowledge on the subject, the last theory is the most convincing and consequently enjoys the most widespread support among the *capoeira* community. No early modern source documents the existence of any art in Africa that is similar to *capoeira*, even though there are specific formal similarities in some contemporary phenomena. Yet the coexistence of various combat games practiced by enslaved Africans in one location is clearly documented in Brazil. In Bahia, for instance, *capoeira* was practiced alongside *batuque* and *maculêlê*, and eventually incorporated and absorbed the latter two during the twentieth century. The existence of different styles within *capoeira* and the struggle over what movements should or should not be allowed also suggests that these might derive from different and conflicting martial traditions. Moreover, specific rhythms and associated types of games were often identified with a particular neo-African “nation” (*nação*), for example, Angola, Benguela, or with Catholic saints (São Bento, Santa Maria). The worship of saints, as practiced by lay brotherhoods, equally fulfilled the function of aggregating slaves and freed people from similar ethnic backgrounds in the Catholic colonies of the Americas. The coexistence of these different types of rhythms and games also suggests that—analogue to Candomblé—different African combat traditions came together in Brazilian *capoeira*.

In the particular case of Bahia, *capoeira* evolved further during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, especially among porters, stevedores, sailors, and fishermen in the port areas of Salvador and the towns of the adjacent sugar belt around the Bay of All Saints. “Vagrancy” (*vadição*), as its adepts called it, was played in breaks during work or in popular neighborhoods on Sundays. It provided entertainment and relaxation from hard labor. Playing *capoeira* or “being idle” (*vadiar*) became an integral part of a broader Afro-Bahian popular culture. Together with *samba-de-roda* and *batuque* it had a prominent place in the multicultural

cycle of celebrations to honor Catholic saints and associated African divinities (from December to Carnival). At least by the end of the nineteenth century, *capoeira* had become a complex manifestation with elaborated rituals.

During the twentieth century, *capoeira* underwent a process of modernization. Paramount to this development were the “Regional” and “Angola” styles that developed in Bahia from 1930 onward. These styles were exported to other regions of Brazil, in particular to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where they underwent further changes and fused into what is known as “contemporary *capoeira*.” Since the 1980s, *capoeira* has experienced an impressive process of globalization and is now played across the five continents.

This chapter examines how *capoeira* lyrics tell the history of the Afro-Brazilian experience. In my analysis of some core themes—Africa, slavery and abolition, wars and famous fighters—I intend to show how *capoeira* maintains a complex and dynamic relation with the past that still provides inspiration and models for contemporary practice. As adepts and scholars have pointed out, the *capoeira* game reenacts the past, a “sinister” past of oppression and betrayal, but also one of resistance and playfulness (Downey 1998: 121).

The Lyrics in the Game

Even though *capoeira* could become a lethal weapon in street fights, everyday practice in Bahia took the form of a game in which it was more important to show the harm one could do to the other player rather than actually cause injury to an opponent. Adepts in Bahia explicitly referred to it as *brincadeira*, or *jogo* (“playing” or “game”) and even today the performance in the *capoeira roda* (circle) is called a game. *Capoeira* took place in an imaginary *roda* that was formed by the orchestra (*bateria*) and the other participants or spectators. Two players knelt in front of each other and next to the orchestra at the “foot” of the *berimbau* (percussion instrument). They listened to preliminary chants until the lead singer intoned one standard phrase such as “turn around the world” (“*volta ao mundo*”). That was the signal for the game to begin. Players genuflected, drew signs on the ground, and started their game. Many *capoeira* groups today still comply with that basic structure.

We do not know what African slaves sang in the nineteenth century *rodas*, but they must have chanted in their own languages. Yet, unlike Candomblé, where secrecy and initiation are paramount, and where the core of religious chants are still based on African languages, more profane celebrations such as *samba-de-roda*, *batuque*, and *capoeira* aimed to reach and appeal to wider, multiethnic audiences. We can thus assume that *capoeira* songs creolized more rapidly, even though we still do not know how that process took place. It is possible that early *capoeira* songs in Portuguese were translations of original African songs. They may have merged verses from various languages and literary traditions from several cultures. Since no nineteenth century transcripts are known, it is difficult to make any definitive statement on the matter although a systematic comparison with African and European genres might shed more light on this issue. Antônio Risério, for instance, has

highlighted the influence of Yoruba *oriki* on contemporary Brazilian writing and the lyrics of MPB (Popular Brazilian Music) (1995: 165–183). Waldeloir Rego has emphasized the influence of medieval Portuguese genres on *capoeira* lyrics (1968: 235, 240, 245).

Capoeira lyrics sung in twentieth century *rodas* touch on many themes. They articulate the everyday struggle for survival or reflect on human relationships and sentiments such as love and friendship, envy and competition. They fulfill a range of functions within the game and beyond it. In formal terms, four basic types of *capoeira* songs can be distinguished. The introductory “litany” (*ladainha*) consists of a monologue by the lead singer who is usually one of the more experienced players or a respected teacher (*mestre*). Since everyone is expected to pay particular attention at this time, the singer uses the moment to pass his personal message to the audience. This is followed by the “praise” (*louvação, canto de entrada* or *chula*), where the chorus repeats the verse of the lead singer. At this time, praise is offered to deceased *mestres* and then to living *mestres* or teachers who might be present (“Iê, long live my *mestre*”). The audience is then informed that the game is about to begin, or that the players are wicked or particularly good at using head butts (*mandingueiro, cabeceiro*). The praise can also be used to warn one player about the strengths of his opponent. When the lead singer starts a *corridor* (short verses that the audience answers with a refrain) the players begin their game.

These three types of song and their sequence are still part and parcel of many of the contemporary *capoeira rodas* that attempt to closely follow tradition. It is therefore difficult to assess to what extent earlier practices departed from this structure. Evidence does suggest that there was at least a fourth type of song, a *quadra* that was commonly executed in early-twentieth-century Bahian *rodas*. According to Greg Downey, the *quadra* is “a type of short solo that is followed by call and response and can be sung during play, unlike the solo *ladainha* which will stop play” (1998: 124). M. Bimba, among others, excelled in *quadras* and has recorded some of them.⁵ Finally, the *cantiga de sotaque* represented a variation or sub-type of the *ladainha* mode. Instead of one player, it consisted of two players who improvised verses alternatively to challenge each other. The *cantigas de sotaque* usually preceded a game between *mestres* or experienced players able to improvise. (Lewis 1992: 169–172) They thus resembled the verbal challenges (*desafios*) common in the popular culture of northeast Brazil.

As Lewis wrote, “the introductory *ladainha/chula* complex clearly establishes a ritual framework for the play to follow” (1992: 217). This ritual framework was maintained during the game in a number of ways. Many *corridos* that were sung during play continued to ask for spiritual protection or referred to a wider religious context. A *roda* was usually closed by a specific *corrido* (“Adeus, adeus”), announcing that the players were about to depart with the protection of God and Our Lady the Virgin Mary. Many *corrido* lyrics take the form of proverbs, which transmit an important insight: “Whoever can’t cope with *mandinga* (witchcraft) should not carry an amulet” (“Quem não pode com *mandinga*, não carrega patuá”).⁶ Since lyrics

frequently use metaphors or allusions, their meaning is never straightforward, but often ambiguous and multilayered. *Mandinga*, for instance, also refers to a particular twisted manner of moving in *capoeira*, which is considered an important asset for good style.

Capoeira lyrics also only acquire their full meaning in the context of the *roda*. The particular situation of the game often explains why the orchestra intones a specific *corrido*. For example, when a small player fells a bigger one, the lead singer might sing: “Baraúna caiu, quanto mais eu” (Baraúna [a huge tree] has fallen, even more so do I). When a player dislikes the jiu-jitsu-type grabbing used in some styles but frowned upon in others, he or the lead singer might start singing: “Ó Dona Alice não me pegue não” (Oh, Dona Alice don’t grab me).⁷ *Capoeira* lyrics can thus tell an episode from the past but at the same time use this episode to comment on the present.

Furthermore, the song will never provide a detailed account of an historical episode. It will only allude to some key moments of a story that the *mestres* or the older players previously made known to the audience in conversations that took place after the *roda*, the training sessions, or on other occasions. Songs therefore relate to broader narratives that have been transmitted in other ways and forms. The polysemy of terms and the ambiguity of a particular episode alluded to in a song allows adepts to play with meanings.

The lyrics entertain a complex relationship with the game as it develops in the *roda*. Songs induce players to “let out their *mandinga*,” to play slowly using all their resources, or to play fast and aggressively. The songs exhort the players and the audience to respect and to follow the traditions of *mestres* who have long since died. The lyrics may also ironically comment on the actual game by drawing comparisons with the past or by improvising critical remarks that are directed toward the players in the *roda*. The possibility of using tradition to interpret the present and to improvise new verses that are adequate for any situation is seen by adepts as a key aspect of *capoeira* lyrics. It allows them to channel emotions and to control aggression within the framework of the *roda*. It places the actual performance within a broader, almost timeless sequence of games that stretches back to an immemorial past. And, finally, it allows practitioners to critically comment on distance themselves from events that are taking place inside and outside the *roda*.⁸

History and Memory in *Capoeira* Lyrics

Waldeloir Rego made it clear that no clean division is possible between the “old” and the “present day” *capoeira* songs. Many lyrics that are considered new are in fact based on very old songs, whereas songs called traditional sometimes have quite recent origins. He also pointed out the difficulty of distinguishing between *capoeira* songs proper and songs of other provenance (*samba*, *Candomblé*, etc.) that are used in a *capoeira roda* (1968: 89). The distinction between “traditional” and “new” songs is difficult because of the tension that exists between tradition and innovation in any *roda* performance. *Corridos*, for example combine a verse by the solo singer with a refrain by the

chorus. Whilst the refrain is often traditional, experienced solo singers begin with a couple of traditional verses and then add their own verses or improvise them on the spot. The same happens in the praise songs, where the solo singer can add new verses to the traditional ones that are then repeated by the chorus.

When Rego published his classic account in 1968, he had witnessed the modernization of the art since the 1930s and thought it necessary to warn his readers against a simplistic distinction between traditional and new songs. The transformations of *capoeira* since its spread throughout Brazil in the 1960s and, more recently into other countries were even more substantial than the changes that Rego observed. The following example illustrates the way songs are disseminated. Every *capoeira* group can now record its own CD and this constitutes a source of prestige and further income if other groups and the wider *capoeira* community adopt the new songs.

For historians, it is nevertheless important to try to distinguish the lyrics that were used at different moments of *capoeira* history. Since the beginning of the last century, for example, some ethnographers and folklorists have transcribed the lyrics that they collected on the spot. Manuel Querino, Edison Carneiro, Antônio Viana and some others have provided us with precious examples from the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1941, Lorenzo Dow Turner recorded *capoeira* songs from two Bahian *mestres* (Bimba and Cabeçinha).

The samples were, however, very limited and unsystematic. Rego's book, which contains over 150 *capoeira* lyrics that he registered from many different *mestres*, represents the first systematic attempt at compilation. The texts he collected reflect what was being sung in Salvador during the 1950s and 1960s. His compilation already contains some important innovations that relate to the emergence of the two modern Regional and Angola styles. I believe, however, that these songs are still relatively traditional when compared to the impressive quantity of new songs that have been composed, performed, and recorded over the last forty years. Together with the songs performed by the "old guard" of Bahian *mestres* such as Waldemar, Traíra, Canjiquinha, Caiçara, Pastinha, Bimba, João Pequeno, João Grande, Paulo dos Anjos, and others (recorded during the 1960s or later) they constitute a corpus that can be considered traditional in opposition to the many and entirely new *capoeira* songs.

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that traditional does not mean unaltered. In the case of the *ladainhas*, a set number of verses of different length are recognized as coming from the public domain. Many *mestres* combine them in their own, original way, often adding or inserting some verses of their own composition. In the case of the *louvação*, a set of well-known praises from the public domain is often followed by a number of new ones that closely follow the established model. The traditional *corridos* start with a basic refrain and some well-known solo verses from the public domain. Every performer may or may not add some new solo verses that still use the traditional refrain. Each performance can therefore consist of an original

combination of traditional elements and the eventual addition of new or more recent verses. In other words, although the core of the older lyrics can be considered traditional, their performance always allows for innovation. This dynamic has led to the existence of many different versions of one *ladainha* or the recurrent use of the same verses in different *capoeira* songs.

Once we recognize the importance of creative bricolage through which traditional songs are complemented and enriched by new additions and interpretations, it is difficult to maintain a strict separation between old and new. Instead of attempting to neatly separate traditional and recent lyrics, it is better to distinguish those from the public domain from entirely new songs by a known composer.⁹ The core structure of these songs from the public domain may be very ancient but this does not exclude recent additions. Unfortunately, it is only sometimes possible to document older versions and in any case, we cannot track them farther back than the first decades of the twentieth century. With regards to the new songs, some *mestres* of the Angola style, such as M. João Pequeno, João Grande, Boca Rica, Paulo dos Anjos, Moraes, or Roberval create entirely new songs that remain within the parameters of tradition, although what exactly tradition entails can still be the subject of heated debates. Composers who represent other contemporary styles take much greater liberties so that some recent *capoeira* lyrics and songs have a greater resemblance to contemporary Brazilian funk or rap.

Since *capoeira* lyrics thematize human relations in specific historical contexts, they can be considered, at least in the broadest sense, to constitute an historical source. Yet, many songs also have a universalizing message about human behavior that evades historical examination. I will therefore concentrate on four themes that seem to me particularly suited to the analysis of the relationship that practitioners have with history and memory: Africa, slavery and abolition, wars involving Brazilians, and famous *capoeira* fighters. For reasons of space I will limit my discussion to the lyrics, and exclude the narratives that *mestres* told before or after the *rodas*, during classes or during other events.

Africa in *Capoeira* Lyrics

There can be no doubt that Brazilian *capoeira* is linked in many ways to the cultures of the enslaved Africans. *Capoeira* in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia has been repeatedly associated with the Angolas and Benguelas, the slaves deported from Western Central Africa.¹⁰ The origin of the *berimbau*, the "soul" and main symbol of the art, is the musical bow that many ethnic groups in the Angola/Kongo region use. On the other hand, the *berimbau* does not appear to have been used for any martial art in Africa and the instrument is played today with a *caxixi* that scholars have traced to the Bay of Benin. The composition of the *capoeira* orchestra is clearly a New World reinvention that combines instruments from various cultures, including the Arab *pandeiro* (tambourine).¹¹

Whilst swift change characterized instruments, audiences, and texts in *capoeira*, the rhythmic patterns seemed to have remained more stable. Ethnomusicologists insist that in contrast to instruments that were used across various culture zones, rhythmic patterns marked more specific regional identities (Kazadi wa Makuna 2000: 132). G. Kubik has called time-line patterns “the metric back-bone” of African music. “They are orientation patterns, steering and holding together the motional process with participating musicians and dancers depending on them. In this quality the removal or even slight modification of a time-line pattern immediately leads to the disintegration of the music concerned” (Kubik 1979: 18) He asserts that these rhythmic key signatures enjoyed great constancy over time. Thus a twelve-pulse pattern in its seven-stroke version played on a bell can be identified as a West African Coastal tradition (Akan/Fon/Yoruba) or a sixteen-pulse pattern as coming from the Kongo/Angola region (Kubik 1979: 124–127).

It is much more difficult to establish transatlantic links regarding the movements, the rituals, and what some adepts call the spirituality of *capoeira*. In my view, any debate over these issues should take into account the lyrics.¹² The texts of *capoeira* songs are always in vernacular language and, in particular, those from Bahia are greatly influenced by the speech of African slaves and their descendants. No creole language developed on a large scale in the Portuguese colonies in America¹³ but even in its mainstream version Brazilian Portuguese has retained important influences of African, mainly Bantu languages. Bahian Portuguese, in particular, is shaped by the way Africans pronounced it. Rego has shown with painstaking detail how words are systematically altered; for instance, the l substitutes the r or is dropped from the end of words.¹⁴

Furthermore, many African terms have entered colloquial Brazilian speech and are used in *capoeira* lyrics. For example, *muleque*—a boy in Kimbundo—has acquired the slightly altered meaning of a street kid in Brazil. Thus the song “The *muleque* is you” (“Muleque é tu”) provocatively states that one’s opponent—to whom the song is addressed—is a badly behaved street kid.

Despite the many formal and ritual aspects that link *capoeira* practice to Africa in general, and to the Kongo/Angola region in particular, relatively few songs from the public domain contain explicit references to things African. One frequently used term is “Aruandê” (or “Aluandê,” “Aloanguê”). It is sometimes employed in association with the interjection Iê!, which is a call for attention, and also the ritual way to start or finish a *roda*, or to introduce the *louvação* (praise song). There seems to be no doubt that the term is derived from Luanda, the capital of Portuguese Angola, an important port in the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil (Rego 1968: 49, 93, 145, 184). *Capoeira* lyrics also use a number of expressions of likely African origin, such as *jacatimba*, *camunjerê*, or *calumbi*.¹⁵ They might or might not be onomatopoeic but for many of these terms no meaning is known among contemporary adepts.

One reason for the relatively limited references to Africa is the repression of *capoeira* and any African cultural manifestation prior to the 1930s. This led to dissimulation and deception. In the case of Afro-Bahian religion, it is possible to

identify hidden references. For example, a *corrido* which mentions *dendê* (palm oil) can also refer to spiritual energy or the messenger deity Exú.¹⁶ Many songs worship Catholic saints such as Santo Antonio, São Benedito, and São Bento. It is well known that slaves chose devotion to particular saints to hide their worship of African Gods to the extent that Candomblé practitioners in Bahia called themselves “the people of the Saints.”

I believe that references to Africa might have been more frequent in nineteenth-century lyrics but disappeared after the end of the transatlantic slave trade due to the growing distance between *capoeira* practitioners and Angolan origins. Although Bahia continued to maintain a number of important links with the Bay of Benin after 1850, it seems that this was less true of Angola. For instance, the *corrido* “Ô lembá, ê lembá. Ê lembá do Barro Vermelho” (“Oh lembá, eh lembá, eh lembá of red clay”).¹⁷ Lembá is a small place in Angola, but also, and more importantly, a feminine spirit associated with procreation, and the birth of twins. Lembá furthermore became the denomination for a specific cult that existed in the Kongo region between 1650 and 1930. Lembá has also been identified in the diaspora, for example as a *lwa* in Haitian Vodou (of the Kongo or “Petro” line) (Ribas 1994: 2, 144; MacGaffey in Heywood, ed. 2002: 214, 223).¹⁸ However, very few contemporary *mestres* associate that *capoeira* song with a specific religious meaning. Lembá is often altered to “lembra” (= remember in Portuguese) and new verses are added that relate to the act of remembering. In other words, in this particular case the original African referent has been lost.

It is possible, on the one hand, to observe the loss of certain African references in twentieth-century *capoeira*. On the other hand, contemporary *capoeira* lyrics, and in particular those of the revivalist Angola style, have systematically reintroduced links to Angola. Traditionalists who aimed to preserve *capoeira* refused its modernization along the lines of M. Bimba’s Regional style in the 1930–1940s. Angola was chosen as their rallying concept, based on the historic association of the art with the Angolan slaves. Hence adepts of the Angola style dubbed themselves *angoleiros*,¹⁹ and invented refrains such as “Angola-Ê” or “Eu sou angoleiro/Angoleiro sim senhor/Angoleiro de valor” (“I am *angoleiro*/an *angoleiro* yes Sir/An *angoleiro* of value”).²⁰

When the Angolan artist Souza e Neves visited Pastinha in Salvador in 1965, he must have told the old *mestre* his theory regarding the single origin of *capoeira* in southern Angola. M. Pastinha thus added the verse “*Capoeira* came from África” to his *Ladainha* “Bahia, Our Bahia.”²¹ Yet after he went to the *Festival des Arts Nègres* (First World Festival of Black Arts) in Dakar, in 1966, he also proudly sang: “Pastinha has been to Africa, to show *capoeira* from Brazil.”²² In other words, older *mestres* did not necessarily see Afrocentric approaches and one’s pride in being Brazilian as mutually exclusive.

The reestablishment of links with Africa or the re-Africanization (a term commonly used for analyzing similar trends in Afro-Brazilian religions) includes a recovery of African locations. M. João Grande, a

disciple of Pastinha who moved from Salvador to New York during the 1990s, sings:

Sai do Congo	I left Congo
Passei por Angola	I passed by Angola
Ceguei aqui hoje	I arrived here today
Quero vadiar Angola	I want to play ["be idle"] Angola ²³

His disciple M. Moraes has created lyrics that provide a careful definition of Angola as opposed to mainstream *capoeira* styles:

Na Angola, na Angola	In [the] Angola [style], in Angola
Tudo é diferente, na Angola (Refr.)	Everything is different, in Angola
Jogo de Mandinga, na Angola	The game is <i>mandigueiro</i> , in Angola
A viola responde, na Angola	The <i>viola</i> answers, in Angola
A pergunta é do gunga, na Angola	The question comes from the <i>gunga</i> , in Angola
Berimbau afinado, na Angola	The <i>berimbau</i> is tuned, in Angola
O jogo é de baixo, na Angola	The game is low, in Angola ²⁴

This *mestre's* belief in the need to reaffirm the African character of *capoeira* has led him to study Bantu languages and compose new songs that intermingle Bakongo and Portuguese terms in similar fashion to the uses by adepts in the old days of the *vadição*:

Ngolo, Nguzu	Ngolo, Nguzu
Força e poder	Strength and power
Kiatálua não	[Envy?]
Vai me vencer	Will not kill me ²⁵

For the period for which we have evidence, these few examples illustrate the extent to which the role of Africa in *capoeira* lyrics has undergone major changes.

Slavery and Abolition

It is possible that many *capoeira* lyrics originated during slavery although only a few songs from the public domain make explicit references to the institution and to the relation between slaves and masters. The most famous one is:

Vou dizer a meu senhor	I am going to tell my master
Que a manteiga derramou	That the butter has spilled
A manteiga não é minha	The butter is not mine
A manteiga é de ioió (DP)	The butter belongs to the master (PD)

This song conveys the malice of the slave. He relates an accident but at the same time one feels that he is gloating over what happened because he stresses that the butter does not belong to him, but to the master.

The covert resistance of the slave coalesced into *malandragem*, malice that has since become a strategy of survival of the urban poor. It is not surprising that *malandro* (rogue, spiv) and *capoeira* became synonyms around the turn of the nineteenth century. The cunning of the *malandro* is alluded to in a number of *capoeira* songs.

Slavery and its abolition are still themes of recent *capoeira* songs. The thirteenth of May, the day of slave emancipation in 1888 became a day of festive celebration in the aftermath of abolition. For example, *capoeira* was prominently played in Santo Amaro in the sugar plantation belt in the market square alongside *maculêlé* (stick fighting dance) and Candomblé. In his *ladainha* performed in the 1980s, the Bahian *mestre* Canjiquinha was among many others in his praise of the princess Isabel who signed the "Golden Law":

Salve! Salve a nação	Hail! Hail the nation
Salve a nação brasileira	Hail the Brazilian nation
Salve Princesa Isabel, ô meu Deus	Hail Princesa Isabel, oh my God
Que me livrou de cativo	Who delivered me from captivity!

(M. Canjiquinha)²⁶

The abolition of slavery underwent a major reassessment during the celebrations of the Centenary in 1988. Black consciousness groups (usually referred to as Movimento Negro) pointed out that black people in Brazil had nothing to celebrate. They opted for the date of the death of the maroon leader Zumbi to commemorate black resistance. Accordingly, the views of many *capoeiristas* on Abolition changed considerably and references to marronage became common:

Dona Isabel, que história é essa	Lady Isabel, what story is this
De ter feito abolição?	That you made abolition?
De ser princesa boazinha	That you are the nice princess
Que acabou com a escravidão?	That finished with slavery?
Estou cansado de conversa	I am tired of that idle chat
Estou cansado de ilusão	I am tired of that illusion
...	...
Viva Zumbi, nosso guerreiro	Long live Zumbi, our warrior
Que fez-se herói lá em Palmares	Who became a hero in Palmares
Viva a cultura desse povo	Long live the culture of this people
A liberdade verdadeira	The true freedom
Que já corria nos quilombos	Already existed in maroon settlements
Que já jogava <i>capoeira</i>	Already played <i>capoeira</i>

(M. Toni Vargas)²⁷

Slavery and its abolition are not the only explicit historical references used in *capoeira* lyrics. The "classic" form of Bahian *capoeira* developed during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. *Capoeira* lyrics from this time referred to Brazil's important steps in nation building and to its participation in two international wars.

The Wars Brazilian *Capoeiras* Fought

Since the seventeenth century, Brazilian masters and colonial authorities used the martial skills of their slaves in times of need. Black troops or *Henriques* (named after Henrique Dias (?–1662) the famous commander of a black battalion in the wars against the Dutch in northeastern Brazil) offered one possible path to emancipation. During the Paraguayan War (1865–1870) when the National Guard and voluntary battalions had to reinforce the relatively reduced Brazilian army, there was a renewed offer of freedom for slave volunteers. The province of Bahia sent hundreds of Brazilian-born slaves as well as thousands of free blacks the 15,000 soldiers to Paraguay. The surviving slave veterans were subsequently freed for serving the fatherland.²⁸ Manuel Querino stated that the *capoeira* soldiers distinguished themselves in bayonet assaults and presented profiles of two of them (1946: 78–80).²⁹

The Paraguayan War resulted in unprecedented patriotic mobilization, a growing awareness of belonging to a Brazilian nation that profoundly altered Brazilian civic culture. In the capital of Bahia the war was behind popular manifestations such as the “pilgrimage of the police” which celebrated the return of the police corps from the battlefields (Querino: 244). Streets and squares of Salvador and other cities were christened with the names of famous battles in which the Brazilian armed forces were victorious.

Given the participation of *capoeiras* in the wider context of an international war, it is no surprise that places and events associated with the Paraguayan War, such as “Humaitá,” “City of Assunción” and possibly “Paranaê,” are among some of the oldest identifiable references in *capoeira* songs.³⁰ The song “I was at home” tells the story of how one man was recruited:

Iê, tava em casa (ô meu bem)	Iê, I was at home (oh my love)
Sem pensar nem imaginar	not thinking nor imagining anything
Quando bateram na porta (meu bem)	when someone knocked on the door
Salomão mandou chamar	Solomon asked for him
Para ajudar a vencer (ô meu bem)	To help win (oh my love)
A Guerra do Paraguá (DP)	The War of Paraguay (PD) ³¹

During the Second World War Brazil sent an expedition corps to Italy to fight under United States command against Nazi Germany. The *ladainha* “Brazil said yes, Japan said no” is still sung in contemporary *rodas* and invokes the participation of an anonymous *capoeira* in that conflict:

O Brasil disse que sim	Brazil said yes
O Japão disse que não	Japan said no
Uma esquadra poderosa	A powerful fleet
Pra brigar com alemão (DP)	To have a fight with the German (PD) ³²

The *ladainha* often includes a passage that clearly expresses the patriotic sentiments of the *capoeira* fighting for his country:

O Brasil já tá na guerra	Brazil is at war
Meu dever é ir lutar (DP)	My duty is to fight (PD) ³³

Since the end of the nineteenth century, nationalist intellectuals and politicians have sought to instrumentalize *capoeira* for their own purposes. During Brazil’s major surge of nationalism from the 1930s to the 1950s, *capoeira* developed into a recognized art form. *Capoeira* was decriminalized during the dictatorship of Getulio Vargas (1937–1945). Vargas, who was later reelected president (1950–1954), attended an official *capoeira* exhibition and endorsed *capoeira* as the national Brazilian martial art. Complex links between *capoeira* and nationalist politics were thus established and even today many *capoeira* adepts use the national colors yellow and green on their uniforms.

Famous *Capoeira* Fighters

“Tough guys” who confront local police or armed groups that outnumber them are more admired in *capoeira* lyrics from the public domain than the Brazilian soldiers who fought abroad. The two outstanding examples are Besouro Mangangá and Pedro Mineiro.

A number of *capoeira* songs recall the death in 1914 of Pedro Mineiro inside a police station.³⁴ This famous troublemaker may have been a pimp in the port area and its red-light district where he had his base. He was prosecuted several times and owed his own violent death to disputes such as his violence against women and fights with other men over women. According to M. Noronha, he was the lover of the waitress Maria José who went out one day with a sailor. Pedro Mineiro followed them, killed one marine, and threw another one from a window. He was arrested and detained at the police station. The captain of the sailor’s ship was dissatisfied with the arrest since it was known that the police chief, Alvaro Cova, was a known protector of *capoeiras*.³⁵ The captain’s men therefore invaded the police station to kill Pedro Mineiro. One *ladainha* tells the story as follows: “The Warship Piauí, anchored in the port of Bahia. An insubordinate sailor jumped off to create mayhem. They ordered Pedro Mineiro to be killed inside the police station, comrade!”³⁶

A number of different versions of this *ladainha* are sung in *rodas*, all emphasizing the death of Pedro Mineiro inside the police station:

Prenderam Pedro Mineiro	They arrested Pedro Mineiro
Dentro da Secretaria	Inside the police station
Para dar depoimento	To give testimony
Daquilo que não sabia(DP)	About what [something] he did not know (PD) ³⁷

The episode of Pedro Mineiro reveals several important facets that help to explain the links between *capoeira* and violence: the use of its techniques to subject women, the rivalry between different corporate bodies such as the navy and the police, and the involvement of *capoeiras* in clientelism. The records in the archives do not always reveal the complex web of wider social significance that lie behind the individual fights and their immediate motives.³⁸

Innovation and Tradition in *Capoeira* Lyrics

Tradition is handed down in *capoeira* through song lyrics and the rituals of the game. Yet tradition is never static or rigid. With regard to lyrics, each new generation of *capoeira* practitioners recombine textual elements into something original and also something new that is still within the boundaries of tradition. Every performer thus adds to the script of tradition: by deleting some components and introducing new ones, he (since almost all are men) produces some change in the texture without fundamentally altering the structure.

The *ladainha* sung by M. Caiçara (1923–1997) might serve as an example of how *capoeira mestres* adapted and merged traditional elements into a new song:

Iê!	Iê! (Attention!)
Iê tava em casa	I was in my home
Sem pensar nem imaginar	Without thinking nor imagining
Delegado no momento	The police chief
Já mandou foi me intimidar	Sent me a warning
É verdade meu colega	Is it true my friend
Com toda diplomacia	With all diplomacy
Prenderam o <i>capoeira</i> /Caiçara	They put the <i>capoeira</i> /caiçara
Dentro da secretaria	In jail
Para dar depoimento	To testify
Daquilo que não sabia	About what he did not know
Camará	Comrade ³⁹

This text combines the beginning of the Paraguayan War *ladainha* with the story of Pedro Mineiro, but Caiçara replaces Pedro Mineiro's name with his own and adapts the outcome to his own needs. He is no longer killed, only jailed to testify what he did not know. Caiçara therefore establishes a direct link between the veterans of that war, the famous tough guy, and himself. He somehow becomes them or at least places himself in the direct continuation of these epic heroes. Anybody who has known Caiçara will easily confirm that he could do this because he was one of Salvador's last tough guys (at least in the old sense of the term). He was arrested many times for disorderly conduct during the street festivals or in the red-light districts of the port area. He even challenged Bimba in his academy and had his jaw broken by the inventor of the Regional style.

Yet modernization of *capoeira* meant that the practice was transferred from the streets into the academies where students paid monthly fees and trained in uniforms. Their *mestres* are no longer tough guys who were famous

in street brawls, but professionals with a reputation to maintain. It is possible that for this reason the genre of stories about Besouro and Pedro Mineiro can no longer be continued, despite the continued acclaim of these famous *capoeiristas*. Contemporary entry or praise songs (*canto de entrado* or *louvação*) often begin by enumerating the generation of long dead *mestres* and then, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, continue to praise those who are present at the *roda*. Some new *ladainhas* are composed for the teacher or esteemed *mestre*.⁴⁰ A number of *mestres* of the older generations such as Boca Rica continue to sing about their own life and experiences:

Boca Rica é um cara legal	Boca Rica is a nice guy
Joga sua Angola, toca muito berimbau	He plays his Angola and berimbau well
Boca Rica é Mestre de <i>Capoeira</i>	Boca Rica is <i>capoeira mestre</i>
Vende tomate, cebola, lá na feira	He sells tomato, onion at the market

And they do this regardless of the fact that their exploits are now of a quite different nature:

Mestre Boca Rica	Mestre Boca Rica
<i>Capoeira</i> (Refrain)	<i>Capoeira</i> (Refrain)
Mestre Nobre de Valor	A noble and worthy master
Foi dar curso em Los Angeles	He gave a workshop in Los Angeles
Até a gringa chorou	Even the gringa shed tears ⁴¹

Conclusion

Even though there is a growing importance of the role of records and textbooks, *capoeira* lyrics still represent a prime example of oral transmission of traditions in the twenty-first century. Songs articulate and transmit the broader aspirations and worldviews of adepts and the wisdom of an older generation of *mestres*. At the same time they fulfill important functions within the specific dynamics of each game. *Ladainhas*, *louvações*, and *corridos* performed in historic and contemporary *rodas* provide many examples of inventive bricolage, whereby sections of older songs are used to compose new ones to suit the singers' purposes. For that reason, songs from the public domain are not rigid restatements whose contents are rigidly fixed but instead they acquire new meanings with each performance. If the *capoeira* game constitutes a kind of dialogue between the movements of two *capoeiristas*, the lyrics help musicians to build up several other dialogues: one is with the players in the *roda*, another is with the audience around the circle, and a third one is among the musicians themselves. These dialogues are made of metaphysical proverbs, historical narratives of a glorious past, or ironic comments on a game. Verses entertain the audience, preserve *capoeira* history, provide models of behavior for younger generations, or maintain the rhythm and stamina of the game. The multitude of functions and cross-references of the lyrics contribute toward the rich texture and the cultural

density of a *capoeira* performance. As is true of the entire game, *capoeira* songs are a prime example of living traditions.

Adepts consider *capoeira* practice to be an emancipating practice in itself and thus the songs provide explanations and legitimacy for the game. If on the one hand the lyrics transmit historical experiences of slavery, emancipation, acts of heroism or pride in being African, Afro-Brazilian, or Brazilian, they also express an extremely dynamic relationship with the past. The past is always reinterpreted from the needs of the present and in that respect one cannot interpret *capoeira* lyrics as immutable historical documents. The evolution of lyrics on some core themes reflects developments that are taking place in Brazil's broader society (and increasingly elsewhere) including the ongoing struggle for emancipation from racial, class, or any other oppression. The reassessment of Abolition or Africa's contribution to Brazilian popular culture is articulated in these changes in *capoeira* lyrics that also provide an important vehicle through which perceptions are readjusted.

Notes

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1. In nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century sources, practitioners are referred to as *capoeiras*, whereas contemporary adepts are now called *capoeiristas*.
2. The most detailed account of this period in Rio de Janeiro is provided by Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, *A capoeira escrava e outras tradições rebeldes no Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850* (Campinas: UNICAMP, 2001).
3. For a more detailed discussion of myths and fakes in *capoeira* history, see Luiz Renato Vieira and Matthias Röhrig Assunção, "Mitos, controvérsias e fatos. Construindo a história da capoeira," *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 34, (1998): 81–120.
4. Annibal Burlamaqui, *Gymnastica Nacional (Capoeiragem) methodizada e regrada* (Rio de Janeiro: n.e., 1928), 11–12.
5. See CD *Essência. O berimbau e a voz do eterno Bimba* (Salvador: Fundação Mestre Bimba, 2001), tracks 1–2.
6. Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 67: 106.
7. For further examples, see Lewis, *Ring of Liberation*, 163–167.
8. For a further discussion of *capoeira* as "verbal play" see Lewis, 162–187 and also Downey, "Incorporating," 127–141.
9. It is worth noting that some recent songs of known authorship seem also to have entered the public domain insofar as performers do not always recognize their authorship.
10. For Bahia, see Manuel Querino, *A Bahia de outrora* (3rd ed., Salvador: Livraria Progresso Editora, 1946), 73; for Rio de Janeiro, see Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, *A capoeira escrava e outras tradições rebeldes no Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2001), 124–33.

11. Elements of Arab civilization came to Brazil through both the Portuguese and enslaved West African Muslims. The tambourine has been used since medieval times on the Iberian Peninsula.
12. Some U.S. scholars have attempted to interpret *capoeira* from an "Afrocentric" perspective, by reading what they consider "traditional" Central African meanings into the contemporary Brazilian game. For the most detailed attempt, see Desch-Obi, "Engolo." Interestingly enough, these interpretations cannot rely on any evidence from the "traditional" *capoeira* lyrics.
13. *Língua geral*, derived from Tupiniquim and other Tupi languages, was the main vernacular used in colonial Brazil.
14. For more details, see Rego, *Capoeira Angola*, 126–141.
15. Quoted in Querino, *A Bahia*, 76 and in Rego, *Capoeira Angola*.
16. Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 33: 94. I have not found any older mention of these lyrics, so it is possibly a relatively recent song. For an analysis of the role of *dendê*, see Raul Lody, *Tem dendê, tem axé. Etnografia do dendezeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 1992).
17. Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 62: 104.
18. Óscar Ribas, *Dicionário de regionalismos angolanos* (Matosinhos: Contemporânea, 1994), 2, 144; Wyatt MacGaffey, "Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti," in Linda M. Heywood, ed. *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 214, 223. In Angola, the gift the groom pays to the bride's family is called *alembamento*.
19. NB: *Angoleiro* refers to the practitioner of Angola in contrast to *angolanos*, the inhabitants of Angola.
20. See M. Boca Rica, CD *A poesia de Boca Rica* (Manaus: Cântaro Estúdio, ca. 2001), track 14. One version of "Eu sou angoleiro" has already been recorded by Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 32: 93.
21. His manuscripts contain two versions of this *ladainha*, but without that verse about the African origins. See Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, "Manuscritos e desenhos de Mestre Pastinha" (Org. by Angelo Decanio Filho, Salvador: 1996), 46A, 60B. The added verse can be heard on M. Pastinha, *Capoeira Angola* (n.p., Fontana Stereo, 1969), track 1.
22. "Pastinha já foi a África, a mostrar capoeira do Brasil." M. Pastinha, CD *Capoeira Angola* (Fontana Stereo, 1969), track 2. I would like to thank M. Cobra Mansa for discussing these *ladainhas* with me.
23. M. João Grande, CD *Capoeira Angola*, New York: 2001, track 6. If not otherwise stated, all English versions of Brazilian songs are my translation.
24. Mestre Moraes, CD *Brincando na Roda* (Salvador: GCAP - Grupo Capoeira Angola Pelourinho, 2001), track 3.
25. M. Moraes, *Brincando na Roda*, track 7.
26. As translated by Downey, "Incorporating Capoeira," 91.
27. As sung by Alex Muniz on the CD João Pequeno de Pastinha (Salvador: WR Discos, 2000).
28. Figures from J.P. de Sousa, *Escravidão ou morte. Os escravos brasileiros na Guerra do Paraguai* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad/ADESA, 1996), 89. Querino (*A Bahia*, 188) claims as much as 18,725 Bahians fought in Paraguay. Oral tradition has it that slave *capoeiras* were already serving in a patriot battalion during the War of Independence, but no written evidence has yet been found to confirm it. See Daniel Coutinho, *O ABC da capoeira angola. Os manuscritos do Mestre Noronha* (Brasília: DEFER/GDF, 1993), 35.

29. Querino, *A Bahia*, 78–80.
30. “Paranaé” probably refers to the Paraná river that runs from Brazil into Paraguay and forms part of the border between both countries.
31. CD—Mestre Traira: Capoeira da Bahia (São Paulo: Sonopress-Rimo, n.d.), track 1. This *ladainha* has many different versions, not all of them mentioning explicitly the Paraguay War. See also Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 60: 103, and 103: 117.
32. Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 78: 109.
33. See for instance M. Canjiquinha, *Capoeira* (São Paulo: Sonopress-Rimo Indústria e Comércio Fonográfica Ltda, 1986), track 18; M. Moraes, CD *Brincando na roda*, track 8.
34. Newspapers also registered the case. See for instance *Diário de Notícias* (Salvador), March 3, 1916.
35. Coutinho, *O ABC*, 24. For another version see Rego, *Capoeira Angola* 126: 122. Pedro Mineiro also enjoyed the protection of the ex-governor J.J. Seabra. See Jair Moura, *Mestre Bimba. A crônica da malandragem* (Salvador: author’s ed., 1991), 60.
36. Coutinho, *O ABC*, 41.
37. CD *Capoeira M. Waldemar & M. Canjiquinha* (São Paulo: Sonopress-Rimo Indústria e Comércio Fonográfica Ltda, 1986), track 14.
38. For a recent assessment of Pedro Mineiro based on new archival evidence, see Antonio Liberac Cardoso Simões Pires, “Escritos sobre a cultura afro-brasileira. A formação histórica da capoeira contemporânea, 1890–1950.” PhD thesis in History, UNICAMP, Campinas, 2001.
39. M. Caiçara, LP *Academia de Capoeira Angola de São Jorge dos Irmãos Unidos do Mestre Caiçara* (São Bernardo do Campo/SP: Discos Copacabana, 1973), track 1. For the translation, see *Capoeira Songbook for estrangeiros*, (Washington, DC: International Capoeira Angola Foundation: n.d.), 4.
40. See for example, “Grande João Grande” by M. Moraes, *Brincando na roda*, track 6; “M. Waldemar da Liberade,” by M. Luiz Renato (Grupo Beribazu), CD *Músicas de Capoeira* (Manaus: Microservice Tecnologia, n.d.), track 3; “Seu Pastinha mandou falar” by M. Pé de Chumbo, CD *M. Pé de Chumbo e convidados*, (Manaus: Sonopress, ca. 2002), track 2.
41. M. Boca Rica, CD *A poesia*, tracks 2 and 3.

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