

# ECAS 2013

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies (Lisbon)

June  
27-29



African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute

## **ECAS 2013**

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies

*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

©2014 Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

ISBN: 978-989-732-364-5

## **MAKING TRACKS: CONTINUOUS RECREATION OF AFRICA THROUGH CAPOEIRA**

**Zoë Marriage**  
SOAS, University of London

[zm2@soas.ac.uk](mailto:zm2@soas.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

*Reference to Africa is central to the Afro-Brazilian art of capoeira, but rather than constituting a static or literal account, references change over time in nature and function. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, capoeira in Bahia was played exclusively by people of African heritage in defiance of the Brazilian state, which criminalised capoeira along with other Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestations. The practice of capoeira maintained continuity of the history that the Brazilian state was working to reject or deny. In the 1930s key capoeira players reconfigured references to Africa, contributing to and reflecting Brazil's changing racial dynamics. Capoeira groups in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to construct references to Africa in moves, songs and principles, recreating a history of and through capoeira. Capoeira has become a global phenomenon, and lineage – in particular African lineage – is fundamental to the perceived and claimed authenticity of groups.*

Capoeira has moved from criminal marginality to cultural icon; it is making tracks in the sense of keeping pace with other developments. It is making tracks in another sense too: in that it constantly recreates its history and purpose. Many capoeira students are not black or have never been to the continent, and claiming an African heritage performs altered political and cultural functions. 'Africa' is also an alternative reality, an inverted hierarchy, and a challenge to dominant order. It is not a point of reference but parallel line of references to other political developments, and the recreation of the continent constructs various sites of resistance.

**Key words:** Capoeira; Africa; resistance; Afro-Brazilian; art

## **Capoeira – journeying from Africa**

The Afro-Brazilian art of capoeira is a way of life, a game, a fight and a dance that draws on and recreates symbols and citations of the African continent. Two players engage with each other in a ring (roda), attempting to trick and bring each other down. Impact is avoided by both players (a kick is generally stopped so as not to hurt the other player) but there is contact, including sweeps, head-butts and body checks. The ring is made up of other capoeiristas who play instruments and sing, providing the interaction between the two with pace and atmosphere.

Capoeira developed in diverse ways in Brazil through the twentieth century, gaining legal acceptance in the 1930s, and spreading from the north across the country in the 1950s and 1960s. It became a global phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s and is now an iconic cultural export for Brazil. These developments in the art have retained and recreated links with the African continent through reference to past events, communities and masters, and by embodying elements of the African origins of the game. As increasing numbers of people have been attracted to capoeira, the constituency of players has diversified politically and culturally.

The relationship with the continent of Africa is often presented or perceived as a point of contestation between the two major styles of capoeira, Angola and Regional. Angola players maintain that capoeira originated in Angola, and Regional players hold that it was developed in the senzala slave houses in Bahia, northern Brazil. There are two points to note: the first is that players subscribe to the version of history that is taught in their group (there is little practice of maintaining intellectual distance from the teaching of the master), and secondly that, the debate notwithstanding, the perspectives are in themselves not contradictory. Regional players agree that elements of the game came from Africa and Angola players agree that capoeira has been

developed in Brazil. The contention is at an ontological level of when these elements became something that is viable to refer to as capoeira.

### **Methodology & approach**

The paper takes as its central research questions: how is Africa recreated in capoeira, what is the political function of this process, and what are the implications for analysis? Its rationale is rooted in the observation that capoeira is a folk tradition that is not in decline and that, while the art has no doctrinal ideology, it is associated with resistance. The paper's findings offer insights into the ways that ideas about resistance and political change are transmitted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not independently of, but in concert with, other aspects of globalisation.

The data in this paper is drawn from research conducted in Salvador, northeastern Brazil, in 2012. Salvador is the city in which capoeira has been played most and most consistently since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the capoeira schools there maintain authority over the legacy and promulgation of the art. The research was emic, involving five months of capoeira training in two groups, the International Foundation of Capoeira Angola (FICA) and Filhos de Bimba/Mestre Bimba Foundation (FUMEB, the seminal Regional group), and participating in rodas led by other groups. Data was gathered on the process of learning in these groups and systematically recorded after class. This emic approach was inspired by capoeira training that I had already undertaken in London that alerted me to the communicative mechanisms of the game.

The data includes somatic, musical, and conventional influences of and references to Africa in capoeira that are then analysed for their role or function within capoeira. The paper finds that the unifying discourse of Africa provides a platform for various resistance narratives within a globalised political space but that the opportunities offered by globalisation bring with

them a frailty: without a steer, capoeira is subordinated to the processes of capital that limit its inclusivity, particularly (and ironically) with regard to the African continent. The conclusions point towards further research into how artistic elements interact with the political in the spread of counter-hegemonic ideas.

### **From custom to tradition**

Capoeira, along with other manifestations of Afro-Brazilian culture (notably samba and Candomblé), was banned in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil. From the time of the earliest recorded observations of capoeira, its practice was an act of resistance to the state's oppression, and one that was linked specifically to the continent and its representation in Brazilian cultural life. Capoeira, with its associations with street fighting, and on account of the support that capoeira gangs had given to the monarchy, was particularly stringently oppressed by the Republic, which made the practice of capoeira an offence in the Penal Code of 1890. The continuation of capoeira under such stricture, and its preservation of African heritage, maintained in cultural expression historical elements that the Brazilian state was working to reject or deny.

Practically all players in the early twentieth century were of African descent, and in a highly segregated society, cultural practices were derived from the continent, albeit in creolised forms. There were also relevant discontinuities deriving from the violence of slavery and the time elapsed in which changes in custom were inevitable, particularly as capoeira was neither written down nor defined by rules. The coerced displacement and shipping over the Middle Passage separated people from others who shared their cultural background; the forced baptism of people who were enslaved separated people from their own past and family heritage. In Brazil, the arduous experience of slavery and the mixing of language groups from different areas

of the continent provided significant obstacles to retaining or specific literal memories of Africa and culture.

### **Academy period**

The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw capoeira taken from the streets to the academy, and was a moment of crucial innovation in the art. Two mestres (masters of the art), Bimba and Pastinha, were pivotal in this process and codified two styles of capoeira: Regional and Angola respectively.

In the terminology of Hobsbawm, the establishment of academies shifted capoeira from a custom (what people do) to an ‘invented tradition’ (a formalisation of custom). Hobsbawm defines invention of tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual and symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 20).

Bimba and Pastinha each defined a canon of moves and music and a pedagogy for transmitting the art. Both men were responding to the negative image of capoeira as either an emasculated folkloric dance or an excuse for street brawling. The invention of tradition brought public recognition to the art and established markers to distinguish it from other practices: the academy, standardised music ensembles and styles, uniforms and the discipline of instruction.

The artistic development of Bimba and Pastinha formalised for their schools what was included in, and excluded from capoeira. The formalisation was far-reaching as it did not simply provide a rubric for the students of the time, it placed parameters on the innovation of capoeira. The institutionalisation associated with the academy, including the hierarchy of the mestre, and

the privileging and channelling of knowledge that it conferred, meant that capoeira was no longer a nebulous pastime, it was something that was learned.

In the dynamic environment of racial politics in Brazil, an important element of the institutionalisation of capoeira was the representation of Africa and its relationship with the state. In the capoeira academy, Africa became something to be taught; Bimba taught white students about Africa, Pastinha taught black students about it. Neither mestre had been to Africa at that stage, and both were revivalists basing their teaching on their cultural understanding rather than empiricism. Africa was exotic in different ways to the groups of students and, in being fundamentally 'other' to the European-Brazilian state and its culture, it formed a modest site of resistance in early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernising Brazil with its segregated society.

### *Regional*

The codification and teaching of Regional was a pivotal moment in Brazil's race relations. Mestre Bimba was the first mestre to accept white students, and exposed them to a range of Afro-Brazilian dance, music and religious cultures, including Candomblé. Bimba's role authority over the privileged class of students he attracted was an inversion of the social hierarchy of the time, and the black mestre imparting black tradition to privileged white students was politically noteworthy.

The development of Regional by Bimba was a mixture of the folkloric capoeira, which had become ineffective as a fighting style and was largely in disuse, with other combat games. Bimba's father practised batuque, an older and more obscure African combat art, and elements of batuque were introduced into Regional. Debate rages about whether Bimba incorporated Asian martial arts that were popular in Brazil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a charge that is consistently

made, particularly with reference to the more aggressive kicks, and is vigorously denied by his son (Nenel 2010, 7) and others of his students. Almeida, who trained with Bimba, reports that, facing ‘this criticism’, “he laughed...but on several occasions admitted he had used attacks and defences from boxing and jiu-jitsu” (Almeida 1986, 115).

These debates over what constituted Regional are historically grounded and provide an optic on the contemporary function of referencing Africa in capoeira. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the contention was around which combat form was the most effective. Bouts were staged between karate fighters and capoeiristas to determine which was the superior fighting craft, and much of Bimba’s early fame came from his success in deploying capoeira in fight situations, including fighting with the police. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, capoeiristas do not regularly pit themselves against practitioners of other arts. Considerations about the combative efficacy of capoeira are vastly outweighed by those about the perceived legitimacy of the art, and the ultimate seal of legitimacy is vested in its links to Africa.

### *Angola*

Angola was codified as a style of capoeira shortly after Regional, and was developed to rejuvenate and preserve the folkloric style in the face of the popularity of the changes introduced by Bimba. The name ‘Angola’ had been used interchangeably with ‘capoeira’ but Pastinha’s codification of his version of Capoeira Angola was no less significant as an artistic development than Bimba’s creation of Regional. While Bimba accentuated the combat elements of capoeira, Pastinha prioritised its non-martial side. As discourse of black consciousness became central to the teaching of capoeira Angola, and it was influenced by other black-led movements, including Rastafarianism and the civil rights movement (Röhrig Assunção 2005, 151). As part of his

ambition to link capoeira with the African continent, Pastinha travelled to Senegal in 1966 to attend a festival for black arts.

Like Bimba, Pastinha regularised the musical ensemble that accompanied his style of capoeira. Regional made use of a number of rhythms composed or arranged by Bimba, many of which were upbeat, generating an exciting and at times spectacular game. Angola groups instead formalised the use of *ladainhas*, long often reflective songs that introduce play and provide an opportunity for story-telling. Angola is also characterised by its relatively slow rhythm that encourages ‘inside play’ when the capoeiristas move intertwined with each other and low to the ground, rather than trading fast kicks and escapes. The logic of this ‘inside game’ relies heavily on theatre and trickery, and accentuates Angola’s style as subaltern and devious.

### **Global period**

In the 1990s, capoeira became a worldwide phenomenon with schools established over Asia, Europe and the Americas. Following endless altercation between mestres through the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the nature and function of capoeira, a third style emerged, Contemporary Capoeira. This combined parts of Regional and Angola and restored the customary element in that players, unshackled from the specificities of Bimba and Pastinha’s teachings, were able to improvise more freely with the style and content of the music and moves. Contemporary Capoeira owes its existence to the other two styles but now commands the vast majority of capoeira players globally.

The worldwide reach of capoeira has impacted on the constituency of its players and has included in the community not only people who have no black heritage or Brazilian history but players in countries that have a conquering and enslaving history. The globalisation of capoeira –

meaning not simply that it is played across the world but that communications and ease of travel have reordered the means by which it is taught and learnt – has intensified the pressure on the integrity of the art. Casting the net wider pushes mestres either to reinforce the tradition of capoeira, and teach classic styles, or to reclaim customary functions and adapt capoeira to new situations. As capoeira is governed not by rules but by convention, coherence is difficult to establish in an episode of rapid and uncharted growth.

### **How is Africa recreated in capoeira?**

A ladainha from Mestre Pastinha's CD includes the lines, "Capoeira came from Africa. It was the African who brought it" (CD Mestre Pastinha). It is a claim on which Pastinha was inconsistent, and Gadamer reminds us that story-telling is an on-going process of reconstruction rather than a reference to a static historical moment (Gadamer 2004, 305). Africa has not 'survived' as traces of the continent in custom, these influences and references have been cultivated and nurtured within the traditions of capoeira. In addition to explicit claims about Africa, elements of the continent are transmitted through the practice of capoeira, even when players are not consciously aware of the significance of the continent or their part in its history.

Judith Butler uses the concept of 'embodiment' to present the case that the body is the mediator between the mind and the environment. In learning music, she argues, the body is integral to the process of signification, and the student, by playing, learns the role and activity of a practitioner corporally rather than cerebrally (Butler 1990). The concept of embodiment has a particularly rich application in the processes of learning capoeira. Students embody the moves, rhythms and melodic lines as well as developing their proficiency on the instruments. Through their experiences of singing, playing and camaraderie capoeiristas embody not only the technique but also the meaning of the history that is being told. By recreating the moves of attack

and escape they learn and teach the fundamental principles of tricking, dodging and staying in the game. They become part of that history – theirs are the bodies through which the tradition passes.

## **Influence**

Bimba and Pastinha standardised the music ensembles that accompany play, and the use of African instruments and musical motifs in the ensembles provides a channel for influences from the continent. Previous to the 1930s, many – any – instruments were used during capoeira games, and at times no instruments. Galm proposes that the incorporation of the berimbau, the one-stringed musical bow, into capoeira was a key part of capoeira's transformation from a fight to a dance (Galm 2010, 26). There are no references to any music accompanying capoeira until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so the orchestration of songs was a notable moment in the invention of tradition.

The Regional *charanga* uses a berimbau, an instrument from central and southern Africa, and two pandeiros (tambourines), these probably being a Portuguese inflection, although other frame drums are used in West Africa. The Angola *bateria* includes alongside three berimbaus of differing sizes, two pandeiros, agogô (the double-headed bell from West Africa), reco reco (a scraper probably used by indigenous Brazilians) and atabaque (foot drum) from central and southern Africa. The mestre routinely plays berimbau, vesting power in this instrument to direct the speed and intensity of play. Its totemic status means that the composition of both ensembles places African heritage at the centre of the capoeira music.

The physical form of the instruments can be traced to central and western regions in Africa (and elsewhere), but the fact that they have been selected as a conduit for tradition and the

ensembles in which they are arranged are inventions of tradition. The rhythms and melodies, similarly, are convincingly ‘African’, in the form, intonation, and use of repetition. The fact that they have changed little since Bimba and Pastinha orchestrated capoeira music the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, signals that their transmission is a traditional rather than a customary practice. Customary practice would see variation over this time, but Regional and Angola groups tend not to veer from the traditional line-up of instruments, structure and musical composition of song. Contemporary Capoeira groups have many more variations in accompaniment, and some have recorded tracks with harmonicas, electric guitars and other instruments in the ensembles but most use traditional instruments – if not the same configurations – during games.

The production of music is both formative and indicative of community activity: most instruments can be played to an acceptable standard without instruction, meaning that music is structurally inclusive. The berimbau demands tuition and practice but given its association with power, it is separated from the beginner more by the political hierarchy of the group than by technique. Reinforcing the inclusivity of music production, all capoeiristas in the roda that encircles play sing and – in Regional – clap. The singing is call-and-response, again both requiring and inviting players to participate in music. These embodied conventions do not uniquely identify patterns as African but are consonant with and share stylistic devices with other Afro-Brazilian practices such as *samba de roda*, *jongo* and *puxa de rede*.

The use of grounded or low body movements and kicks is another indication of African influence, or a cultural claim to that end. Combat games pre-existed the slave trade in the Congo-Angola region and various manifestations of similar practices are evident in the Caribbean, including in Martinique and Cuba, and also in the southern United States. Dance elements of the game of capoeira are intertwined with aspects of samba and Candomblé and movements that

ground the body and lead by the hip are more reminiscent of African styles than of the European styles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Reference

If influence is the embodiment of moves and music by contemporary students, reference is the more explicit claims that are made about the identity of capoeira and capoeiristas. The most common form of reference made in capoeira is to lineage and with it school or style.

In Regional, Bimba is referenced in the overwhelming majority of contemporary songs sung in the FUMEB academy (Canguru n.d.), the group that is led by his son Mestre Nene, and in the group's name, 'Children of Bimba.' Angola groups refer to Pastinha less, but make constant and interchangeable reference to Angola as a place and as a style of capoeira. The recurrent assertion 'I am Angolan' is a common lyric in songs; it makes reference to the country and lineage but is also synonymous with the statement, 'I am a capoeirista'. Ultimately, the legitimacy of Bimba and Pastinha is reiterated by tracing their own instruction to 'Africa': both mestres were taught in Salvador as children by men about whom very little is known beyond their first names and the fact that they are referred to as 'African'.

Beyond the reference to lineage, reference to the African continent and heritage is much stronger in Angola than Regional. Angola songs regularly reference the Orixás, the West African deities, as protective forces for capoeiristas, either invoking them by name or more obliquely: Yemanjá, the deity of the sea, appears as a mermaid in songs, or Orixás can be addressed by the names of their Catholic saint counterparts, with whom they were twinned when the practice of Candomblé was illegal. Reference to Africa is also made through a number of words from

central and west African languages that occur in songs sung with Angola academies: N'zambi (God in Lingala), Aruanda (a central African spiritual home), Benguela (an Angolan port).

There are also frequent references made in song to nature, including the sea, trees, animals, birds and the moon. The natural environment sets the traditional scene for capoeira (slightly ironically as the invention of tradition was predicated on teaching in academies rather than outside) and is constantly associated with Angola (however Angola is understood). There are lots of songs about snakes, and various animals are invoked in play: a half-backflip is a *macaco* (monkey) and a squatting jump a *sapinho* (little frog). The music and physical play generate the ambiance of a jungle, referencing not the predators but the smaller animals that live by their wits.

A final reference that is made to the continent is through the ubiquitous reference to *mandinga* in both styles of capoeira. *Mandinga* refers originally to an ethnic group from West Africa but is used in capoeira to mean a form of magic: the ability to trick or surprise the other person. It is connected to the control of the emotional space of the *roda*, and is considered a skill within the game. *Mandinga* is referenced in songs and capoeira nick-names, and embodied in various moves including incorporating elaborate swings or arm movements into the game to disorient the other player, and the tracing of signs on the floor.

### **Africa out of time & place**

The Angola game is not necessarily in literal terms closer to a historical African art. Early depictions of capoeira have none of the head movements or low, intertwined play that are characteristic of the Angola style. This does not mean, though, that the influence of and reference to the continent is illegitimate. The recreation of Africa as part of capoeira tradition is not

dependent on an unbroken line of practice. Memory is a combination of past experience and present interests (Schwartz 2000), and the functions of recreating the continent through capoeira change over time and space.

The specificity of the name ‘Angola’ is indicative of customary use of the name in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and a conceit of the tradition. Between 1550 and 1850, 1,2 million Africans were brought to Bahia, of which 350,000 were from Congo-Angola region and 850,000 from Benin and Biafra (Verger 1981, 55). While Angola is constantly present in capoeira, the West African influence is also strong in the use of the agogô and in reference to the Orixás and mandinga. No other African country is mentioned in capoeira lyrics (except one that runs, ‘I left Congo and went to Angola’, and a very few references to ‘Bantu,’ an indistinct set of African ethnic groupings).

Further, Angola is not mentioned in the classic canon of capoeira songs and its ubiquitous mention has been introduced since the invention of tradition. The lack of customary reference is not surprising: Angola was not a formed nation at the time when people were being enslaved, it referred chiefly to the slaving port – a place that people would be unlikely to sing about with any degree of nostalgia.

The term ‘Capoeira Angola’ was increasingly used in the 1930s to distinguish it from Regional and to refer to the capoeira played in Bahia (rather than the more violent practices associated with the gangs of Rio de Janeiro). In the 1960s, when Pasinha was over 70 years old, comparisons were first made with the n’golo initiation dance, also known as the ‘zebra dance,’ practised in Angola. Reference to the continent increased greatly in the 1980s with revival of Angola groups and heightened interest in black heritage. As interest in African heritage

increased, stories built up around the name, and 'Angola' referred back to Africa and to the area now called Angola from which some elements of capoeira derived.

### **Making tracks**

Capoeira has moved from criminal marginality to cultural icon. Capoeiristas have proved versatile; unlike many other folk art forms, capoeira is not threatened by a lack of interest. Its threat, if it is perceived as such, comes from the over-popularity of capoeira and uncontrollable innovation. Arguments between adepts about what constitutes capoeira and what does not are longstanding; capoeira changes with each generation and its conventions are perpetually contested. In this way it is making tracks: not being trapped as a nostalgic or folkloric art, practised by older generations for tourists. It is also making tracks in a second sense: despite the breadth of following, capoeiristas are able to construct and reconstruct the path of their own history, sifting in and out the elements that are helpful to them.

### **Moving on – folk tradition that is not in decline**

The significance of capoeira to Brazilian culture and its popularity across the globe in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century were neither planned nor foreseen by capoeiristas or by the Brazilian state that attempted to regulate them in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Capoeira is now played all over the world, including in countries with histories of colonisation and slavery. The number of players has increased, as has the diversity of their backgrounds. Interpretations of history and its significance vary across individuals, groups and styles, but capoeira is practised as a meaningful art, rather than being merely a workout or a hobby, and its slave or African roots are consistently acknowledged.

Capoeira has interacted with the processes of globalisation leading to innovations in institutions, community and communication. Formerly taught from mestre to student in a defined time and place, alliances and camaraderie are transformed by ease of travel with teachers and students travelling to and from Brazil and, in more abstract ways, through the extension offered by digital media. Groups based in Salvador, Brazil, command expansive networks of capoeiristas, and communicate with them through CDs, facebook and other indirect or impersonal channels. Their financial viability is boosted by the foreign capital that larger groups and visiting students afford, but the expansion exposes the coherence of the group and the nature of the community to vulnerability.

Africa, through its various influences and references provides a recognisable and relatively cohesive source of legitimacy, and intersects with groups' focus on lineage to provide a stronghold in the increasingly diverse manifestations of capoeira. The authority of the mestre of any group is dependent on his or her mestre; the authenticity of the group depends on the group from which it sprang. In a globalised context of teaching and learning capoeira, the discourse of Africa reiterates the centrality of lineage to authority, and orients the understanding of current capoeira communication and communities with respect to the authority of teachers from Brazil and by implication – if sometimes rather tenuously imagined – from Africa.

For capoeira students, the abstracted concept of Africa provides an easy buy-in as there are no limits on its interpretation: capoeiristas of all backgrounds can adopt an African heritage through their embodiment of contemporary history. Participation in the conventions, music and somatic elements of this African heritage provides players with an identity as a capoeirista and a member of a community. Engagement with the discourse of Africa preserves a foundation that provides a distinctiveness and significance of the art.

The Africa recreated in capoeira and the contemporary significance of lineage generates a continuous imagined past, including allowing old mestres and historical heroes, to accompany the present. ‘Long live Pastinha’ is routine as a musical devotion, especially at games convened to commemorate his death. Bimba, his students and his lovers, feature throughout the songs sung by FUMEB; but the songs sung by Bimba make no reference to his mestre (Bimba n.d.). References to the senzalas or to labour on plantations once reflected capoeiristas’ daily lives but now recall an early 20<sup>th</sup> century capoeira demographic of black working class men and provide a lens through which to view contemporary inequalities. Reflection on these previous social contexts is made the more poignant by the fact that the end of slavery is frequently disputed in capoeira songs, and this maintains the history of slavery and politics of inequality central to Brazilian culture.

### **Recreating history and purpose**

Claims about African heritage reject the superiority of the colonisers’ history. In Foucauldian terms, capoeira provides a ‘counter-memory’ that challenges dominant memory (Foucault 1977) of modern Brazil. The notion of an African culture and history presented through the influence of, and reference to, the continent confronts the European commoditisation of African people during the slave trade and the historical supremacy of European music, dance and religion. At its core, the discourse on Africa forms a bulwark of opinion against slavery: a political position on which all can agree.

The Africa that is referred to in capoeira is not a historical or geographical reality, it is a uniting subaltern discourse that is open to continuous re-interpretation and development. The out-of-time and out-of-place Africa constitutes a refusal to accept the inevitability of the

trajectory defined by dominant power. Reference to Africa has accompanied and interacted with processes of race relations and other politics in Brazil and more widely, and the African continent has been renegotiated and re-created to support the identity and political aspirations of capoeiristas.

Embodiments of African-derived practice generate alternative cultural realms, and these change over time. *Vadiacão* – hanging out – is synonymous with capoeira and offered an escape from labour, proposing alternative priorities to the calculating and competitive processes of industrialising 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazil. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, notions of ‘hanging out,’ and the emphasis on community, camaraderie and tradition take on their own resonances in sports halls around the world where students from a variety of backgrounds meet for capoeira training. By reproducing the conventions of community, alternative ways of life are established through the processes of musical, lyrical and somatic communication.

The Africa recreated in capoeira goes further than simply offering a distraction from labour and a rejection of urban or mercenary life; it establishes a counterpoint to the tame zones of modernity. Through reference to and embodiment of the natural environment, capoeira establishes a site for struggle and for the renegotiation of norms, values, hierarchies and laws. The jungle recreated through capoeira is potentially threatening to outsiders, but for practitioners it is a nurturing jungle that introduces the possibilities of freedom: a space in which the usual laws do not apply and that hierarchies can be upside-down (like cartwheels).

Africa also constructs an emotional or spiritual refuge. Rather than being somewhere that has been left behind, Africa is the other side of the *kalunga*, the Middle Passage. The reference is to a geographical and historical feature, but it has spiritual overtones: the *kalunga* marks the other side of death, where the ancestors live and provide guidance and protection. Africa is

recreated as a source of inspiration and meaning that resides in people's identity, beliefs and artistic expressions. It has a historical function in granting meaning and continuity but it is present: this is what makes capoeiristas who they are. The exclamation that, 'I'm going to wander round Angola' is synonymous with 'I'm going to play capoeira.'

Capoeira's spread in recent years, driven by globalisation the economic advances of Brazil since the 1990s, has not included Africa (the place). The continent of Africa is largely excluded from an art that uses its influences as its ultimate source of legitimacy and rationale. There are fewer players on the continent than in the Americas, Europe or Asia. The outcome is somewhat unexpected: that the ways in which Africa has been reconstructed within 21<sup>st</sup> century capoeira mirror broader processes affecting – and marginalising – the continent.

The contemporary reality of Africa is not incorporated into the canon of capoeira discourse, and the struggles of those living on the continent are not a source of resistance or solidarity. Around four million African people were enslaved in Brazil during the era of the slave trade. Their history is embodied in the history told by and through capoeira. More people have been killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo since the start of the war in 1998; capoeira's extemporary Africa does not frame a consciousness or resistance that incorporates their priorities. Instead it turns to causes that involve the globalised middle-classes: social projects and environmentalism.

### **What are implications for theory?**

Artistic expressions are relevant to discussions on social movements and globalisation because it is in creating and recreating art that people forge their thoughts and values. Capoeira's growth in Brazil and the wider world demonstrates an exceptional redistribution of cultural – and

to a lesser extent political – power. Thoughts and values interact at individual and group level, and art is a vector for their spread. In capoeira, thoughts are grouped around themes but not corralled and the lack of driving ideology allows it to appeal to people in different ways.

On account of its subaltern history and present, capoeira presents a set of data that differs in content and mechanism from the majority of work on social movements and political debate. It allows insights into the roles that artistic creativity and expression play in how people engage politically and adopt ideas surrounding non-ideological causes. Butler's notion of embodiment has provided a starting point for considering the spread of norms and values through non-cerebral channels: capoeira students often embody the African history before understanding their role in it. This proposes a avenue of research into political interaction. Methodologically it is challenging in that it does not assume rational interest, and instead would work towards an analysis of diverse processes of decision-making and norm-setting.

The content of the discourse on Africa in capoeira provides a forum for a number of concerns to be aired, without being attached to a teleological ideology, this presenting a further challenge to conventional conceptualisations of decision-making. There is no united political agenda in capoeira, but artistic commitment is made to broad issues of social justice through discontent with the mainstream and the continuing attention brought to the significance of African culture within Brazil. The mechanism of transmission, through the bodies and music of capoeiristas, means that there is a broad spectrum of interpretation that is fluid and changeable.

This freedom of interpretation is key to capoeira's popularity and sustains a site of resistance, but it brings with it structural weaknesses: the flow of ideas and values depends on processes of globalisation and the opportunities and constraints that it imposes. Capoeira forms some sites of resistance, but they are small and the radical agenda is limited; they do not engage

directly with the African continent or with the systems of global capital. As in the game of capoeira, the institution of capoeira largely dodges the attack of the forces that it critiques. With a dodge, like a capoeirista, it survives to keep up the interaction and challenge for another day.

## References

- Almeida, B. (1986). Capoeira. A Brazilian Art Form. History, Philosophy and Practice (Mestre Acordeon). Berkeley, California, North Atlantic Books.
- Bimba, M. (n.d.). Curso de Capoeira Regional. Mestre Bimba. CD mais livreto com 14 lições ilustradas. Salvador, Brazil, Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira.
- Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London, Routledge.
- Canguru, M. (n.d.). Meu berimbau companheiro. Salvador, Brazil, Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira.
- Foucault, M. (1977). Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.
- Galm, E. (2010). The Berimbau. Soul of Brazilian Music. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. and T. O. Ranger (1983). The invention of tradition. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nenel, M. (2010). "Somos felizes e satisfeitos com o que herdamos' Interview with Mestre Nenel (Manoel Nascimento Machado)." Iê Capoeira. Empório Editorial Ano 1(3): 6-9.
- Röhrig Assunção, M. (2005). Capoeira. The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art. London and New York, Routledge.
- Schwartz, B. (2000). Abraham Lincoln and the forge of national memory. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Verger, P. (1981). Notícias da Bahia – 1850. Salvador, Brazil, Corrupio Comércio Ltda.