

## Imagining Brazil in Africa: Capoeira's Transatlantic Roots and Routes

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### R E S U M E N

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Este artigo examina cidades africanas como os mais recentes pontos do circuito transnacional da capoeira. Uma África imaginada tem sido parte integrante da prática da capoeira no Brasil, porém, apenas recentemente foi que capoeiristas brasileiros começaram a viajar à África. Baseado em trabalho etnográfico realizado no Brasil e em Angola, examino esse “retorno” da capoeira à sua pátria imaginada e argumento que esse fluxo no Sul Global é um processo recíproco de imaginação: enquanto os capoeiristas brasileiros imaginam que Angola possui as raízes geradoras de sua prática, os capoeiristas angolanos imaginam o Brasil como o preservador dessas raízes. Os jovens de Luanda e Benguela abraçam a prática como uma cura para a crise de identidade comunitária resultante de quase meio século de guerra. Tanto os capoeiristas angolanos quanto os brasileiros mobilizam a capoeira para se enraizarem em um passado local e, ao mesmo tempo, criarem um futuro global de mobilidade transnacional e cosmopolitismo. [Brasil, Angola, diáspora, capoeira, cultura expressiva]

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### A B S T R A C T

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This article examines African cities as the newest nodes in the transnational circuitry of capoeira. An imagined Africa has long been an integral part of capoeira practice in Brazil, but only recently have Brazilian *capoeiristas* begun traveling to Africa. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Brazil and Angola, I explore capoeira's “return” to its imagined homeland and argue that defining this Global South flow is a reciprocal process of imagining: while Brazilian *capoeiristas* imagine Angola as holding the generative roots of their practice, Angolan *capoeiristas* imagine Brazil as preserving these roots. Youth in Luanda and Benguela embrace the practice as a way to heal a communal identity crisis resulting from nearly a half century of war. Both the Angolan and Brazilian *capoeiristas* mobilize capoeira to simultaneously *root* themselves in a local past and

create a *route* to a global future of transnational mobility and cosmopolitanism. [Brazil, Angola, diaspora, capoeira, expressive culture]

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On a balmy October evening, I stepped off a TAAG flight from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to Luanda, Angola. I was one of a small party of *capoeiristas* on a “roots tour” to Africa. One of my companions, an Afro-Brazilian from the northeastern state of Bahia, knelt on the tarmac with tears in his eyes. Kissing his fingers and touching them to ground he murmured, “I have come home.”<sup>1</sup>

It was 2002, and the Angolan rebel Jonas Savimbi had been captured and killed, ending a twenty-seven-year civil war that had devastated Angola since its independence from Portugal in 1975. I was in the midst of my doctoral fieldwork on capoeira in Rio de Janeiro. I had been training capoeira since the early 1990s and by the time of my fieldwork had become a member of—and was focusing my research on—ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA, one of the largest capoeira associations in the world. I trained with Mestre Camisa (José Tadeu Carneiro Cardoso), the founder and *mestre* (master) of the group, and dozens of mixed-level students three times a week in a public schoolyard. When Mestre Camisa announced in class one evening that he would be traveling to Angola with two other high-ranking instructors in the group, I asked if I could tag along. Because I was known as a researcher and had also just recently received my new “cord” that designated me as a “*graduada*” or advanced student in the group, Mestre Camisa agreed.<sup>2</sup>

Our trip, billed “Em Busca de Raízes” (“In Search of Roots”), was ostensibly a mission to move closer to the elusive origins of capoeira. Mestre Camisa, like many practitioners, believes capoeira developed out of an amalgamation of warrior dances and combat games that journeyed with captured Africans from the Portuguese slaving ports of Luanda and Benguela, Angola, to the ports of Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The paucity of historical documentation prior to the nineteenth century and the complicated relationship capoeira has had with national and racial politics in Brazil since, has led to competing narratives and debates about the exact place of origin.<sup>3</sup>

As I show in what follows, the capoeiristas I traveled with wished to create a stronger connection to the imagined roots of the expressive practice to which they dedicate their lives. There was also another, possibly more important goal—namely, to promote the global spread of capoeira. For the Brazilian delegation, Angola represented not only the *past*—capoeira’s “ancestral” or “spiritual” home—but also the *future*. Angola and other African locales are the newest node in the robust transnational circuitry that has made capoeira globally visible in the last quarter century. Today, along with Brazilian, Italian, English, Swedish, Japanese,

Israeli, and Mexican capoeiristas, there are Angolan, Mozambican, South African, Togolese, Senegalese, and Moroccan practitioners, to name just a few.

To be sure, capoeira has been global since its inception, traveling in some form or another from Africa to Brazil and even possibly returning to Africa at different points along its several-hundred-year history.<sup>4</sup> Africa as a concept, or “imaginary community,” has long been a powerful presence and source of identification and desire for many Brazilians involved in capoeira and other Afro-Brazilian cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> But today Africa is also a destination to which more and more Brazilians travel; it is the home of similarly mobile subjects with their own needs, imaginings, and desires.

This article tells the story of an encounter between Brazilian and Angolan capoeiristas and the convergence of “roots” and “routes” in an embodied diasporic expressive practice. I argue that a process of reciprocal imaginings occurred: while the Brazilian capoeiristas imagined Angola as holding the generative roots of their art form, the young Angolan capoeiristas—who grew up during a war that destroyed many local expressive practices—imagined Brazil as the preserver and promoter of their cultural roots. Transnational routes become a way to preserve, revitalize, and even reinvent roots just as these roots, in turn, provide access to transnational routes. A past-looking project converges with a future-facing one. This future is spatially located neither in Africa nor Brazil but in the transnational *movement* of a commodified expressive culture and embodied practice: both parties from opposite sides of the Atlantic imagine capoeira as a route to a new kind of global mobility and cosmopolitanism.

This case study of a diasporic expressive practice “going home” joins in recent rethinking about the African diaspora. It challenges the spatial and temporal conceptualization of the diaspora as “homeland and peripheries” or “past and present” in which Africa figures as a static, traditional past, and the “new world” as a dynamic, innovative present. Instead, it tells a “periphery to periphery” story of a Global South ebb and flow of ideas, embodied practices, material goods, and people that engages the past, present, *and* future. Furthermore, it takes seriously the pressing need to no longer ignore African subjects in diasporic conversations.<sup>6</sup> As James Ferguson reminds us in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (2006), it is not just scholars or members of the diaspora who reify an imagined Africa from afar. Rather, there exists a “range of social actors on the continent [who] understand their own situations, and construct their strategies for improving them, in terms of an imagined ‘Africa’ and its place in a wider world” (2006, 6). It is just such Angolan imaginings—of the homeland, of Brazil, and of the diasporic connections between the two—that I explore in this essay.

Before returning to Angola, I situate the recent transnational expansion of capoeira within the larger frame of globalized black culture. I lay out the ways in which the story I tell is distinct from other examples of popular African diasporic

“roots tourism.” I then turn to the particulars of the Brazil–Angola connection, and the ways in which Africa figures into Brazilian capoeiristas’ understandings of their expressive practice and notions of authenticity. Finally, I turn to the young Angolan capoeiristas to understand how they construct local ties and claims to capoeira through cultural production. By composing songs, doing theater, and making musical instruments, these youth claim capoeira as their own cultural and historical heritage. Along with claiming roots, they mobilize capoeira as a route to visibility in a global arena. I conclude with some reflections on the ever-expanding pathways this new–old black diasporic expressive practice takes, and its potential for bringing individuals together in an intimate—if at times fraught—corporeal dialogue.

### **Globalized Black Culture and Roots Tourism**

In the late 1980s, when I was first introduced to capoeira in Berkeley, California, it was little known outside of Brazil. Like many in the first waves of Americans to become practitioners, I was a middle-class, white woman in her early twenties with a dance background. I was mesmerized and attracted to the hybrid aesthetic of capoeira. The music, ritual, element of “battling,” low-to-ground movement, and funky footwork reminded me of breaking, tap, and other African diasporic dances; and the high, circular kicks and flowing acrobatics were reminiscent of Asian martial arts and modern dance. I was most attracted to capoeira’s playful improvisation—capoeiristas do not “fight” or “dance” but “play” (*jogar*)—and the diversity of players. Capoeira’s objective (though there is no recognized winner or loser) is to show greater physical, aesthetic, and strategic prowess in a game of stealing, claiming, and negotiating space. And occasionally knocking one’s opponent off-balance. Play occurs between two partners in a tight circle, or *roda*, surrounded by singing and clapping participant-spectators. In my first exposure to capoeira in the Bay Area, these participant-spectators ranged in age, gender, race, and nationality.

When I started traveling to Brazil in the mid-1990s (a rite of passage for foreign capoeiristas) I discovered that unlike in Berkeley, I was often the only white, female, non-Brazilian capoeirista among the black, lower-class, male youth with whom I trained. I began to understand the complicated race, gender, and class politics that have shaped and continue to shape capoeira in Brazil. In the working-class suburbs of Rio de Janeiro where I spent most of my time, capoeira was still viewed as an aggressive, lower-class male street activity.<sup>7</sup> I was exposed to a rougher capoeira, which I came to understand as an outlet for the violence, frustrations, and social suffering of daily life for many in Brazil.

By the new millennium, capoeira's popularity had exploded. Still taught in community centers and outdoor public spaces in poor neighborhoods in Brazilian cities, it had also entered health clubs, dance studios, nursery schools, and universities throughout Brazil and around the world. And it was permeating mainstream media: video games (*Tekken 3*, 1997); car commercials (Mazda, 2000); family comedies (*Meet The Fockers*, 2004); martial arts films (*The Protector*, 2005); fashion spreads (*Vogue*, Spring 2006); reality shows (*America's Top Model*, 2009); and cartoon sitcoms (*Bob's Burgers*, 2011). Capoeira seemed to have joined the ranks of zumba, belly dance, bhangra, and other hip dance/fitness fads that offer "exotic" ways to move the body.

As so often happens in popular culture, as capoeira was repackaged and disseminated for global consumption it became an unstable referent cut loose from cultural or ethnic specificity and open to various interpretations (Fabian 1998). Brazilian-ness, and more particularly Afro-Brazilian-ness, is sometimes replaced with a vague "Latin-ness" (video action figure Eddie Gordo sounds like he should be eating burritos in Los Angeles, not playing capoeira in Rio de Janeiro). Beyond representations of capoeira in advertising and popular culture, in some health club classes the fundamental characteristics that mark capoeira as an African diasporic-embodied practice have been muted or even erased. These characteristics include, among other things, the improvised, circular movement, the percussive music on African derived instruments such as the *atabaque* (drum), *agogô* (two-toned clapper), *reco-reco* (bamboo scraper), and the *berimbau* (a single string bow and gourd), and the call-and-response singing (in Portuguese occasionally inflected with Bantu or Yoruba words) that dictate rhythm and speed and carry verbal messages about the type of game to play.<sup>8</sup>

In a few extreme (if rare) instances, capoeira's defining ethos has disappeared entirely. "Capoeira workouts," sometimes found in fitness gyms and online, are nonstop aerobics-style classes of repetitive movement sequences done to a recorded soundtrack that might be capoeira music remixed with electronic beats, or just generic workout tracks.<sup>9</sup> Students learn simple techniques—kicks and "escapes" and perhaps some limited acrobatics and floor movement—in lines facing a mirror or next to a personal trainer. They do not learn to play with a partner, and thus capoeira's strategic and cunning improvisation and dialogue is completely lost.

Capoeira pop culture references and workout fads, however, tend to be fleeting. More prevalent and enduring in capoeira's globalization are groups of dedicated students determined to embody not only the movement but also what they understand of capoeira's history and culture. To this end, in capoeira schools in the United Kingdom (Delamont, Stephens, and Campos 2017), Canada (Joseph 2008; Robitaille 2014), and the United States (Travassos, 2000), there are often concerted efforts to display cultural markers. In some academies "Brazilian-ness" is evoked: Brazilian flags and murals depicting carnival, beaches, and street scenes adorn the

walls. Sometimes the result is an imagined, exotic Brazil where the sun always shines, carnival is year-round and everyone is adept at samba, soccer, and capoeira (Travassos 2000).

Along with evoking and reminding practitioners of capoeira's cultural context, these markers of Brazilian-ness also create authenticity in the eyes of practitioners who deploy them.<sup>10</sup> As more non-Brazilians teach capoeira abroad, a mestre's broken or heavily accented English or muscular body might be enough to ensure that one is learning the real thing (Joseph 2008; Robitaille 2014). In other academies, it is not Brazil but Africa (or the African diaspora) that is indexed. Murals of Bob Marley, Nelson Mandela, Yoruba *orixás*, or the Ethiopian flag allow capoeiristas to experience their practice as part of a larger Pan-African world.<sup>11</sup> In such academies, skin color or hair style of the mestre can be important in claiming authenticity, which in this case is tied not to national identity but to a black identity that, like notions of Africa, traverses national boundaries.

The desire of some practitioners to emphasize the blackness of capoeira—what I focus on here—must be understood in the larger context of an ongoing project to re-Africanize black culture in Brazil.<sup>12</sup> While black culture's accelerated globalization and commodification in recent years has perhaps intensified this project, it is one that in fact stretches back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Influenced by transnational movements to liberate and empower members of the diaspora—from the early twentieth-century “back to Africa” and negritude movements of Afro-Caribbean Marcus Garvey and Aimé Césaire to the later U.S. Black Power and African independence movements—Brazilian intellectuals and cultural producers began to reevaluate their own expressions of black culture. Effects were first felt in the religious arena, where certain houses of Candomblé became intent on eliminating the syncretic elements of this religious practice that mixes Catholic and various African saints, rituals, and prayers.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, music and carnival groups—especially in the Northeastern city of Salvador, considered to be the black heartland of Brazil—began to refashion themselves as more “African” beginning in the 1970s. Today, along with missions to “empower” Afro-Brazilians, these projects are inflected with a desire to increase authenticity in the growing black culture market.

This re-Africanization of Brazilian popular culture has put Salvador, Bahia, on the map as an important center for creating and exporting black culture, and as a desirable “roots tourism” destination (Pinho 2019). The phenomenon of “roots tourism” or “heritage tours” that has been growing since the 1970s has attracted the attention of academics for the ways in which it problematizes simple readings of race, history, and tradition. Studies of McDonalds-sponsored heritage tourism to Gambia (Ebron 2000), slave fort tours in Ghana (Holsey 2008), and South Carolinian Yoruba religious practitioners pilgrimaging to Nigeria (Clarke 2004) document the sometimes incongruous encounters between African Americans and

local Africans who hold differing understandings of Africa, blackness, tradition, and history.

Brazilian capoeiristas traveling to their “ancestral home” of Angola may at first read like yet another roots tourism story. However, I suggest that there are several powerful differences. First, most of the literature on roots tourism focuses on a North–South or West–East movement in which members of the Global North—usually African Americans from the United States—travel to Global South countries in Africa or the Caribbean. This story, in contrast, is about a Global South exchange. While Brazilian capoeiristas may be relatively wealthy compared to their Africans counterparts, many of them are in fact from marginalized groups in their homeland. Both Brazil and Angola are increasingly players in global markets, particularly oil, but without visible benefits for everyday people. As Ferguson reminds us, global connections are always “selective and discontinuous” (2006, 14). The players in this story, while apparently entering the great transnational flow of culture and bodies, are still situated on the peripheries, struggling for their own small footholds in a global political economy.

Second, roots tourism is usually based on the idea that diasporic subjects share a common racial and historical identity; in this instance, while race, ethnicity, or history may be evoked, it is a corporeal practice that creates a shared subjectivity. In this way, I (as a white capoeirista) as well as Mestre Camisa (who is also white) could be seen as legitimate members of the capoeira roots tourism trip. Of course, this inclusion did not negate or erase our race, or our differing subject positions in the world compared to our black companions. It did, however, index the diversity of subjectivities in capoeira’s imagined global community, and ideas of human commonality that jostle uneasily with black empowerment agendas in the practice. Finally, while most capoeiristas agree that their practice has a distinctly African aesthetic, it was virtually unknown in Angola until brought there by Brazilians.<sup>14</sup> Thus, capoeira’s connection to Africa is open to infinite imaginings. I turn now to how one such historical and traditional imagining is understood, and deployed, by Brazilian capoeiristas.

### **Angola–Brazil Connections and Hierarchies of Purity**

Angola and Brazil were both Portuguese colonies and vital nodes in the transatlantic slave trade. As early as the sixteenth century, the two colonies had established their own direct connection, often bypassing the center of Lisbon in the robust movement of people, material culture, and expressive practices. Yet these Angolan—or more accurately West Central African—ancestors are often overlooked in studies of Brazilian and African diasporic studies.<sup>15</sup> This is especially surprising given the fact that Central Africans made up almost half of the enslaved who crossed the Atlantic and dispersed widely, creating, according to some scholars, a “common

glue” across African American populations everywhere (Heywood 2002, xi). In the case of Brazil, the Angolan cultural influences tend to be overshadowed by the West African influences, particularly of the Yoruba and Dahomey of the Nigeria–Benin region. One reason for this may be that Central Africans came in the earliest wave of the slave trade and embarked from an area of Africa that was already highly creolized because of the long-established Portuguese presence there (for instance, many Africans in Luanda and Benguela already practiced Catholicism and spoke Portuguese). Thus, by the time that academics and cultural producers became interested in identifying African “retentions” in Brazil in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Central African traits were less visible than the more recent West African ones. In addition, by the mid-nineteenth century transatlantic crossing between Angola and Brazil had dropped off, while trade links between Brazil and West Africa remained strong even after the official end of the slave trade in 1850.

In any event, as Stefania Capone argues in *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé* (2010), academics and practitioners privileged Yoruba cultural practices in mobilizing discourses of authenticity to create a hierarchy of purity and power. Thus, for example, the Bahian doctor and anthropologist Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1935) established a distinction between the “purer” and therefore superior West Africans (known in Bahia as the Nagô nation) and the more creolized and “corrupted” and therefore inferior Central Africans (known in Bahia as the Angola nation).<sup>16</sup> This logic extended into the religious arena: Nagô Candomblé houses practiced Yoruba rituals and thus were considered authentic, and the Angola Candomblé shrines practiced Bantu ceremonies and therefore were considered inauthentic.<sup>17</sup>

In an interesting reversal, in the case of capoeira, the term *angola* came to denote what was considered a more “traditional” and authentically African style over a more hybrid and “modern” style. The bifurcation in schools of capoeira began in the 1930s in Bahia. Whereas capoeira had been outlawed and almost eradicated in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the nineteenth century because of its association with street gangs, in Bahia capoeira was undergoing a process of institutionalization. Under populist dictator Getúlio Vargas’s promotion of Brazil as a “racial democracy,” certain Afro-Brazilian cultural practices came to be woven into narratives of national identity. Taking advantage of this new political environment, the two most famous capoeira masters, Mestres Pastinha and Bimba—who had allegedly learned their art from Angolans in Salvador—opened academies. Mestre Bimba (Manoel dos Reis Machado), an Afro-Brazilian of imposing stature and a fierce fighter, developed a style that he called *luta regional da Bahia* (“regional fight of Bahia”). Mestre Bimba incorporated other fighting techniques into his style so as to make it competitive with jiu-jitsu and other martial arts popular at the time (Abreu 1999). Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha) and other capoeira mestres



of the time protested that Mestre Bimba's style "diluted," "de-Africanized," and "whitened" capoeira. In counterdistinction to what came to be known as Bimba's *capoeira regional*, they called their style *capoeira angola*. Their claim to be the keepers of a more "traditional," "pure," and "African" capoeira was supported by those Brazilian and North American academics interested in African retentions in the Americas.<sup>18</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century, this claim was forwarded by African Americans who embraced *capoeira angola* in political projects of pan-African identity and unity. A book by an Angolan-born artist in the 1960s that chronicled his travels through Angola and Brazil provided support for the Angolan roots of capoeira through a series of illustrations depicting similarities between capoeira and *engolo*. Sometimes referred to as the "zebra dance," the *engolo* is a competitive, acrobatic male dance from southern Angola; its backward zebra-like kicks are reminiscent of certain capoeira attacks (Neves e Sousa, n.d.). In light of this evidence and in support of liberating discourses that rejected capoeira's birth under the specific conditions of slavery in Brazil, some practitioners came to believe capoeira was created and practiced by free men in Angola.<sup>19</sup>

Capoeira schools today, while prolific in style and lineage, still tend to be categorized as derivatives of either the *regional* or *angola* style.<sup>20</sup> ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA falls within the *regional* lineage. In fact, Mestre Camisa, who was fifty years old at the time of our trip and began playing capoeira as a boy in Bahia, claims to have briefly trained in Mestre Bimba's academy before moving to Rio de Janeiro as a teenager. His style and his base in Rio de Janeiro, rather than Bahia, however, mark his capoeira as less "African." When asked what has been his greatest obstacle in capoeira, he replies that it is the *fofoca e preconceito* ("gossip and prejudice") of other capoeiristas who accuse him of being a "culture vulture."<sup>21</sup> These accusations—which I often heard from capoeiristas of all ranks from different groups in Rio de Janeiro throughout my fieldwork in the early 2000s—are not necessarily fueled by his racial identity or politics. Mestre Camisa is passionately committed and vocal about promoting capoeira as an Afro-Brazilian practice and black social movement. Many of the high-ranking students and instructors in his group are Afro-Brazilian, and he often references structural and everyday racism in Brazil when talking about his work with capoeira. Instead, the accusations were spurred by Mestre Camisa's remarkable success branding and internationally selling his capoeira style, which is technically sophisticated and aggressively competitive.<sup>22</sup> The group logo, reflecting its planetary ambitions, is a globe encircled by the name "Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira" (Associação Brasileira de Apoio e Desenvolvimento da Arte-Capoeira), shortened to ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA.

At the time of its creation, the ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA brand seemed to depart from other groups that evoked symbols of Brazilian history, slavery, Afro-Brazilian

resistance, or Africa (for instance, one international *capoeira angola* group indexes *engolo* with a logo depicting a zebra and a man playing capoeira together). In fact, the acronym *abadá* forms an Arabic word that references *both* slave resistance *and* modern capoeira: *abadá* were the long white frocks worn by the enslaved Malês (Muslims from West Africa) in Salvador, which were dubbed “war garments” after the 1835 Malê revolt. Today the word refers to the white pants worn by capoeiristas.<sup>23</sup> However, the group’s longer name projects an image of professionalism and globalized capoeira, two goals expressed in the group’s mission statement.

One attraction of ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA lies in the opportunities to professionalize that it provides to its members from all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (Wesolowski 2012). Although critics complain about its sportified and mechanical style, it allows for a kind of franchisable consistency, while still embracing new movement, songs, and styles of play. One of the high-level instructors on the Angola trip is an example of the artistic, social, and economic gains that can come to those who dedicate themselves to capoeira and the group. Charm (Jorge Gomes Martins), in his thirties at the time of our trip and not yet the mestre he is today, is an Afro-Brazilian man from Goiania. He grew up in poverty and, like Mestre Camisa himself, had little formal education. Yet today he holds a BA in Physical Education and has a successful capoeira school in Brazil. He is known for the beautifully melodic capoeira songs he writes and records and for creating new fluid, low-to-the-ground moves. Like Mestre Camisa, Charm travels frequently around the world teaching workshops for which he is handsomely remunerated.<sup>24</sup> The instructors and Mestre Camisa were not paid for their services in Angola, insisting that the experience was an honor and pleasure in itself. Mestre Camisa talks about his trips to Angola as more significant than all his other international trips combined; he repeats often that while he is not interested in learning English (insisting international capoeiristas learn Portuguese), he would like to learn a Bantu language.

Mestre Camisa is adamant that capoeira is constantly evolving because it is “living culture, not to be put in a museum.” At the same time, he believes capoeiristas have a responsibility to recuperate (*resgatar*), preserve, and incorporate historical elements into their game. Thus, his connections to Angola can be read as both an emotional and intellectual project as well as an attempt to “re-Africanize” and thus legitimize and promote his style of capoeira.

### **Creating Roots and Routes**

Mestre Camisa first traveled to Angola with a group of his students in 1992 and again in 1996, during ceasefires in the civil war. He was invited by a Brazilian

journalist living in Luanda who wanted to help restore the severely diminished cultural life of the city. The journalist imagined that capoeira would appeal to young Angolans, whom he described as “*guerreiros*” (“warriors”).<sup>25</sup> Inspired by the Angolans’ enthusiastic response, Mestre Camisa encouraged one of his students to stay behind and teach in Luanda. When the instructor left after a year, the Angolan students continued training on their own. With the resurgence of the civil war, the novice capoeiristas remained isolated, even as capoeira was becoming more global. With the definitive end to the war in 2002, the Angolans wasted no time in inviting Mestre Camisa and a delegation back to Luanda to preside over a *batizado* (baptism), a ceremony in which new members are inducted into the group and more experienced students receive colored cords that designate rank.

The young Angolan capoeiristas were moved by Mestre Camisa’s arrival. Many of them broke into tears and called him “*pai*” (“father”). During our two weeks in Luanda, the students worked hard to promote ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA: they organized classes and public performances; meetings with the ministers of culture and sports; panel discussions at universities; and radio station interviews. While working to bring visibility to their practice, they also worked their bodies: they trained every day for hours, attempting to incorporate and perfect the style and technique that Mestre Camisa and the other instructors passed on to them (Fig. 1). At the culminating event, they ensured that the *batizado* looked like other ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA *batizados* around the world: instruments perfectly tuned, the most current songs sung, the proper order of events, and a large banner with the group’s logo hung.

At the same time that the young Angolans fashioned their bodies into the ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA style and conformed to the group’s rules of conduct, they spoke of eventually creating their own Angolan or African style of play. Though vague as to what that might look like, the young capoeiristas were adamant about their intimate claim to capoeira. One young man described it as “sleeping within us.” Others spoke about recuperating the lost history and traditions of their homeland and to heal from the communal traumas of war. In the words of Nzinga, a twenty-six-year-old female leader of the group: “Our country experienced a huge identity crisis because of the war. Youth were lost. They didn’t have anything to identify with, so they turned to North American rap and reggae and rock. Then capoeira’s rhythm called them. They saw the movement and they heard, ‘This is yours, this was born here like you. This is your history.’ And so, they begin to find themselves in capoeira and feel that they have a place in the world.”<sup>26</sup>

I was, in fact, unable to detect an “Angolan” style in their play, and was instead struck by their considerable proficiency in the ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA technique. One thing that did distinguish their play was its heightened aggressiveness at times and the students’ apparent pleasure, and often laughter, at the messy collision of bodies. While this was in part due to their still developing control as capoeiristas,

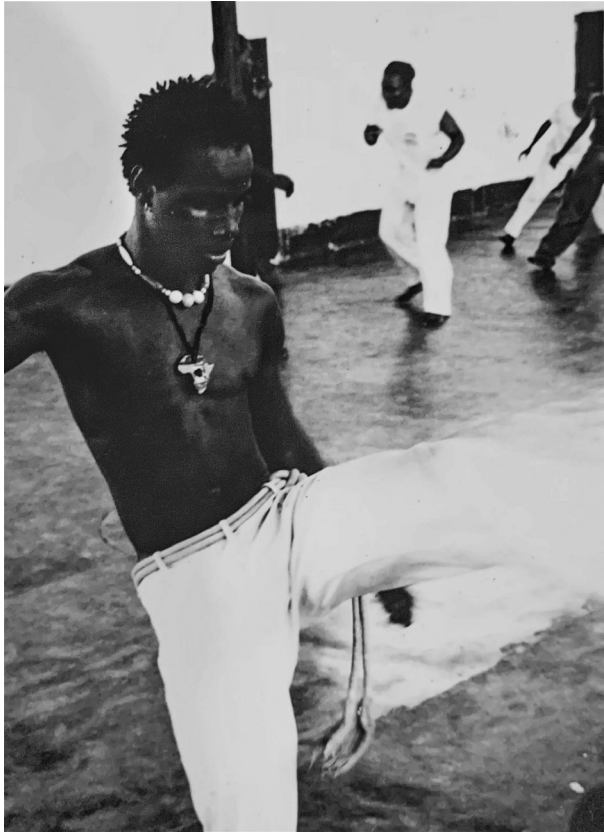


Figure 1 *Training capoeira in Luanda. Photo Credit: by author, Date: October 2002.*

some of it may have been a consequence of a postwar environment. For the most part, residents of Luanda had not been directly affected by the civil war, as it was fought mainly in the provinces, only reaching the capital briefly in 1992. However, as Nzinga suggested, the country as a whole was experiencing postwar trauma. Whether any of the young capoeiristas had experienced the war (some may have been refugees from the provinces) or not, they had all lived through the stories of suffering and violence. During the *batizado*, the students put on a play about capoeira's origins. At the reenactment of slavers flogging captives with much relish, the audience laughed, clapped, and hooted. When I commented on this later, my Angolan companions sighed or shrugged it off. Laughter, they said, and perhaps the pleasure of inflicting and receiving pain, was one of the few recourses for dealing with extreme violence and suffering.<sup>27</sup>

For the young Angolans, "finding themselves" in capoeira was not just about incorporating movement; it also involved cultural production that tied them

temporally and spatially to Brazil, capoeira, and Angola. Nineteen-year-old Balú expressed this subjectivity in a capoeira song he wrote entitled, *Terra Mãe* (Mother Land):

<i>A ilha da Luanda</i>	The island of Luanda
<i>Terra da bassula e</i>	Land of Bassula and
<i>Terra de Mãe Kianda</i>	Land of mother Kianda
<i>E também seu Balú</i>	And also of Balú

<i>Também tem capoeira pura</i>	It also has pure capoeira
<i>No pé do berimbau</i>	At the foot of the berimbau
<i>Para voce lá jogar</i>	For you to play there
<i>Tem que ser bom jogador</i>	You must be a good player
<i>Eu não sei como falar</i>	I don't know how to speak
<i>Não sei como dizer</i>	I don't know how to say it
<i>Na roda de capoeira</i>	In the capoeira roda
<i>Quem fala alto sou eu</i>	The one who speaks loudly is me <sup>28</sup>

In the opening verse, the composer and singer locates *bassula* (a local wrestling art) and himself on the Ilha, a sandy spit of land that juts off the city, which he calls home. The second verse names Luanda as also a land of “pure” capoeira and good players. In the final verse, the capoeira roda is a space that allows the singer to transition from voiceless-ness to voice.

During the *batizado*, the students put on a play about capoeira’s creation myth.<sup>29</sup> It told the story of enslaved Africans sent from Luanda and Benguela to Brazil where they melded their distinctive fighting arts to create capoeira. This narrative differed from other capoeira origin stories in not referencing *engolo*, the “zebra dance” from Angola’s interior, but *bassula*, a wrestling fight practiced by fishermen on the Ilha de Luanda, and *kambangula*, a slap-boxing style from Benguela. These fights situated capoeira’s origins on Angola’s coast, which Mestre Camisa has visited and where ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA was present.<sup>30</sup>

Six hundred kilometers south in the former slave port city of Benguela, other youth were constructing different local ties to capoeira. After a grueling twelve hours on a road pitted with jeep-size potholes and edged with handwritten landmine warnings, we arrived in Benguela and were met by a small group of youth passionate about capoeira and eager to add to their meager arsenal of knowledge, pieced together over the years from a video, a book, and the occasional Brazilian visitor.<sup>31</sup> With few resources, the students had turned to indigenous sources, making their own distinctive instruments from local materials. They told us they had found the perfect wood—with the requisite combination of strength and flexibility—to make a berimbau. They took us to a village thirty kilometers away, where, with an exchange of cigarettes, we were granted permission by the *soba*

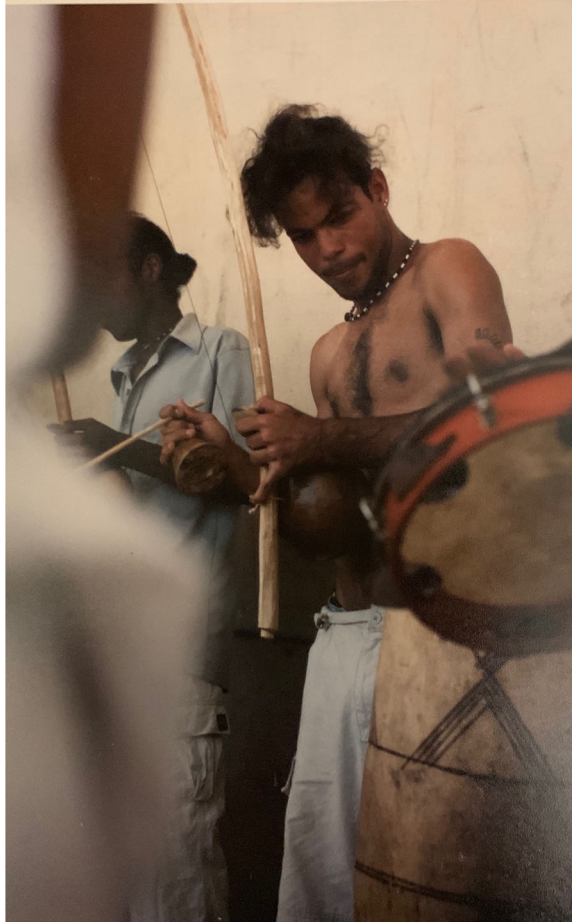


Figure 2 *Playing hand-made, local capoeira instruments in Benguela. Photo Credit: by author, Date: October 2002. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)] [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

(chief) to harvest saplings from the local *pau elefante* (elephant wood) to make berimbaus. These instruments subsequently traveled to Luanda, Rio de Janeiro, and eventually to the United States (Fig. 2).

### Capoeira Cosmopolitanism

It is no longer just material culture journeying from Angola to Brazil. In 2013, I was at the *Jogos Mundiais* (World Games), a biennial event hosted by ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA in Rio de Janeiro, when I heard a robust call from across the room.





Figure 3 Still image taken from the video by the Angolan capoeirista and performance artist, Cabuenha (Júlio Janquinda Moniz), *Planeta Africa Cabuenha Poesia no Imbondeiro*, produced and directed by Cabuenha and Yewa; used with permission of Cabuenha (see “Ethnography In-Sight,” this issue). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Looking up at the sound of my capoeira nickname, I saw a young man hurrying over to greet me. Dressed in the same white uniform as everyone else, it took me a moment to place him. He chuckled and said, “*Sou eu, Cabuenha da Luanda!*” (“It is me, Cabuenha from Luanda!”). He registered my surprise as I took in the instructor cord around his waist. He explained that he still lives, and now teaches, in Angola but travels around the world to ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA events whenever he can. Like capoeira instructors in Brazil, he primarily makes a living teaching in elementary and nursery schools but also maintains “*um trabalho social*” (“community work”) with youth in Luanda’s poor neighborhoods. Cabuenha also researches Angolan dances and combat games, which takes him around the country to meet elderly masters. He sees this work and his work with capoeira as ways to help “develop (*desenvolver*) Angola” and instill self-esteem and a sense of “*Angolanidade*” in youth.<sup>32</sup> Before we parted, he reminded me about the Luanda delegation’s presentation of Angolan folkloric dance later in the event (Figure 3). Since 2013, Cabuenha has become a prolific multi-media performance artist whose work expresses his re-routed return roots search for self identity in capoeira (Figure 3).

In an ethnography of a village in northern Togo, Charlie Piot (2010) argues that Togolese often submit to the disciplinary discourses and practices of transnational entities (NGOs and charismatic churches) so as to feel they belong in and to the modern, global world. However, they mobilize these modernizing techniques of power for their own benefit, positioning themselves as agents of their own futures.

Even in the face of the uncertainty of these futures, they maintain an optimism that rejects the colonial/postcolonial role of agentless dependent.

I saw a similar desire and optimism in the young Angolan capoeiristas. They too embrace modern projects of self-discipline: through mimicry of bodily style (movement and dress) and observing institutional regulations (hierarchical organization and obligations) they seek inclusion into a transnational capoeira institution that, in some ways, erases local difference. Yet at the same time, they play with these conventions, making capoeira their own, and Angola's.

In July 2019, I returned to Luanda for two weeks of fieldwork. Capoeira has exploded in Angola.<sup>33</sup> ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA is now just one of dozens of groups in Luanda. Some of the leaders of these groups, who spent the war outside of Angola and returned after 2002, are eager to incorporate Angolan elements into their capoeira. Forty-two-year-old João, who lives and works for an oil company downtown but teaches *capoeira Angola* to poor youth on the outskirts of Luanda, first encountered capoeira in England: "It was the music that called me. It was a flashback to home as it reminded me of the tribal music that I used to hear as a kid on television shows."<sup>34</sup> Now João incorporates local instruments into the capoeira orchestra, such as the *dikanza*, a longer version of the *reco-reco* scraper. Other capoeira teachers are writing new capoeira songs in Kimbundu and other local languages.

These new articulations of capoeira music are similar to the Angolanization of national music, which blended European and Angolan instruments and sounds. During the late colonial period, a new musical style developed that Marissa Moorman describes as "locally rooted and internationally resonant" (2008, 25). It generated a cosmopolitanism that simultaneously moved toward the nation and outward to a "world upon which [Angolans] could make claims and that they hoped would make claims on them" (2008, 18). In a similar way, Angolan capoeiristas today are drawing on foreign influences—no longer European ones but diasporic ones from the Global South—to create a new cultural practice and experience of *angolanidade* that is locally rooted and internationally mobile.

The story of capoeira's "return" to Africa is a story of diasporic becoming and belonging. In their trans-Atlantic encounter, the Brazilian and Angolan capoeiristas recognized themselves, and each other, as diasporic—and cosmopolitan—subjects. While this shared subjectivity is contingent on the imagined roots of their practice, it is also dependent on aspirational, and sometimes realized, routes to a global future. The story reminds us of the importance of attending to emerging Global South connections, and to the ways in which diasporic subjects are experiencing and theorizing diaspora.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thank you to Patricia de Santana Pinho, Matthias Röhrig Assunção, Tommy DeFrantz, Ana Paula Höfling, Charlie Piot, Orin Starn, and several anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and comments on versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup>My research in Rio de Janeiro from 2001 to 2004 involved participant observation (training three to five times a week, helping with youth classes, and attending events every weekend) and forty interviews. I also traveled throughout Brazil visiting other capoeira groups. My doctoral research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, which provided a supplementary grant for my trip to Angola. The trip with the group (Mestre Camisa and three other high-ranking instructors) was two weeks long and I stayed an additional two weeks.

<sup>3</sup>For an analysis of competing origin narratives, see Assunção (2005).

<sup>4</sup>The earliest recorded return of capoeira to Africa was Mestre Pastinha's attendance, with a performance group, at the First World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966.

<sup>5</sup>Departing from Benedict Anderson's classic "imagined communities" of nation-states (Anderson 1983), Patricia de Santana Pinho suggests "imaginary community" as a more accurate term for the ways in which Brazilians imagine Africa since the "community" ("Africa") itself is as fictive as the ties that bind its members (2010, 15).

<sup>6</sup>The field of African diaspora studies at first focused on the United States and then in the 1930s expanded to the Americas and Caribbean. More recently, with Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1995), diasporic studies have still tended to relegate contemporary Africa and Africans to the background. Some exceptions include Matory (2005) and Clarke (2004).

<sup>7</sup>Capoeira history varies between regions in Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, it was practiced by street gangs of enslaved and freed men and was outlawed in 1889. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, it was still viewed as an activity among lower-class, Afro-Brazilian males. Not until the late twentieth century—in part due to its globalization—did it become mainstream across class, race, and gender.

<sup>8</sup>For instance, a song with the refrain "*quebra!*" ("break!") might incite players to a more competitive game, whereas a song with the line "*joga bonito que eu quero ver*" ("play beautifully for me to see") will calm riled players.

<sup>9</sup>See American personal trainer and *Biggest Loser* reality show celebrity Brett Hoebel's "Get Brazil-ified" online workouts: <https://www.popsugar.com/fitness/30-Minute-Capoeira-Workout-34193652> (accessed on March 13, 2017). In the late 1990s, I took several Capoeira Workout classes at NYC Equinox Fitness Clubs.

<sup>10</sup>Stuart Hall suggests that a defensive response to globalization has been "the return to fixed forms of identity and other cultural and ethnic particularisms" (Hall 1996, quoted in Pinho 2010, 69).

<sup>11</sup>I have seen such adornments in capoeira schools in New York City, Rio de Janeiro, Oakland, and Durham, North Carolina. See Downey (2005) for an ethnography of an Afro-centric capoeira group in Bahia.

<sup>12</sup>Here I follow Livio Sansone's understanding of black culture as "neither fixed nor all-embracing" but in which certain objects, such as the body, are central (2003, 11). See also Hall (1996).

<sup>13</sup>See Capone (2010). This process of re-Africanization began in the 1930s, influenced by academics and intellectuals seeking out African "retentions" in the new world, and intensified in the 1970s. However, movement between Brazil and West Africa has been part of the Candomblé world since the nineteenth century (Matory 2005).

<sup>14</sup>Again, while some capoeiristas choose, for political reasons, to believe capoeira existed in Africa prior to Brazil, most practitioners believe it was created on Brazilian soil out of an amalgamation of African combat games. To view some of these combat games, and for another example of capoeira roots

tourism, see the 2013 documentary film, *Jogo de Corpo*, directed by Assunção, Pakleppa, and Cobra Mansa.

<sup>15</sup>The name Angola originally referred to N'Dongo, one of the states in present day Angola. The ruler of the state was called N'gola in the local language and the Portuguese colonizers appropriated this term for the name of the state, and eventually the whole colony. In Brazil, the term *Angola* became an umbrella identity label (or “nation”) for enslaved Africans from a variety of ethnicities throughout the Southwest and even Southeast (Mozambique) region of the continent.

<sup>16</sup>In his writing, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1935) refers to this distinction as Sudanese/Bantu.

<sup>17</sup>There is some debate over how much Nina Rodrigues’s analytic terms influenced Candomblé practitioners or whether notions of Yoruba purity were already an emic articulation (Assunção 2015).

<sup>18</sup>For an in-depth study of Bahian capoeira from the 1920s–70s that resists the traditional/modern dichotomy and focuses on stage performances and particular innovators, see Höfling (2019).

<sup>19</sup>Practitioners in Brazil come up with a variety of origin stories: one of the most extraordinary I heard was from an instructor who told me that capoeira was invented in the *navios negreiros* (slave ships), hence the reason it is played low to the ground because the cramped holds did not allow the enslaved to stand up fully.

<sup>20</sup>The new and popular *capoeira contemporânea* (contemporary capoeira) tries to unite *regional* and *angola* in one style, as expressed in the motto “*capoeira é um só*” (“there is only one capoeira”). For some practitioners, especially of the more “traditional” *capoeira angola* style, this claim is an anathema.

<sup>21</sup>Mestre Camisa (José Tadeu Carneiro Cardoso), interview with author, March 15, 2004, Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>22</sup>In the ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA style there are a variety of “games” tagged to certain berimbau rhythms (e.g., *Benguela*, *Angola*, *Iuna*, *São Bento Grande*, and *Amazonas*) that differ in movement, speed, and intention. However, when the group was defining itself in the early 1990s, it was notorious for its high-speed, high-kick *São Bento Grande* game.

<sup>23</sup>The word also refers to the T-shirts that allow people to parade with the carnival *blocos* in Salvador.

<sup>24</sup>High-level mestres and instructors in ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA and other international groups can make up to several thousand dollars when they travel to teach workshops and officiate events.

<sup>25</sup>João Belisário, personal communication with author, October 21, 2002, Luanda.

<sup>26</sup>Brenda (Nzinga) Fortes, interview with author, November 16, 2002, Luanda.

<sup>27</sup>Or as one of my anonymous reviewers pointed out, this laughter may index a different view of the transatlantic slave trade (rendered largely invisible in Angola). See Goldstein (2003) and de León (2015) for similar observations about laughter and humor in dealing with extreme suffering and violence. On laughter and postcolonial Africa, see Mbembe (1992).

<sup>28</sup>Balumukeno de Lemos, interview with author, October 31, 2002, Luanda.

<sup>29</sup>Often at *batizados*, the ceremony in which students receive new colored cords is accompanied by a performance of other folkloric dance (*samba, puxa de rede or maculelê*), or in this case, a theatrical representation of capoeira history.

<sup>30</sup>In problematizing monogenetic origin narratives, Assunção suggests that it is highly improbable that *bassula* was an ancestor of capoeira as it appears to be of more recent practice. He offers an alternative theory: “Given the extended and frequent contact between Luanda and the Brazilian ports since the time of the slave trade, one might as well conceive that it was rather capoeira that influenced *bassula*!” (2005, 58).

<sup>31</sup>Mestre Camisa and the other Brazilians had left Angola. I traveled to Benguela with a young French man, who lived and worked for an oil company in Luanda, and his Angolan girlfriend, both of whom trained capoeira with ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA.

<sup>32</sup>Professor Cabuenha (Julio Janquinda Moniz), Skype interview with author, July 20, 2015.

<sup>33</sup>One capoeirista in Luanda has compiled a list on Facebook of eighty-one groups: [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2207920979244499&id=100000798548588](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2207920979244499&id=100000798548588) (accessed on October 26, 2019).

<sup>34</sup>João Van Dunem Reis, interview with author, July 4, 2019, Luanda.

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