

Capoeiragem in Rio de Janeiro

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Special Presentations

Here I am, with sixty-eight years old, almost fifty of which in capoeiragem; first, learning and teaching the basics; next, writing articles and books, presenting conferences around Brazil and around the world. I have therefore been a witness, no matter how much a modest one I could have been, of the growing success Capoeira has reached, almost ironically, after having been, in a not so distant past, forbidden by the Brazilian Penal Code.

People ask me sometimes (my wife does it constantly) why I write so much on the subject. The answer, with some sense of humor, is always the same: “nobody loving Capoeira escapes from punishment.” Besides – here I think to myself, maybe as an old journalist and administrator professional habit – I turned out to take the role, always polemic, of questioning what is actually questionable and to expose and reflect about what is contradictory. I take the inevitable risk not to be understood by some for some time (but again, not by all, for all time).

As a matter of fact, dear reader, up to these days, I have no notice of anyone able to refute my positions, by reasonable means. One of the most severe ones, no doubt about it, is my thesis according to which the so called “Contemporary Capoeira”, better known as “Regional Bahian Fighting Art” (*Luta Regional Baiana*), rigorously speaking, insofar as it is a fighting art, it is neither regional, nor it is totally Bahian.

As a fighting art, without the slightest doubt, it drank from the source of Old Rio de Janeiro’s capoeiragem, according to a large amount of documentation. There are only a few reactions against this point, to my knowledge, which happen to be weakly founded, and sometimes even hysterical.



In terms of its musical elements, it drank from the source of North-Eastern folk music & literature (*literatura de cordel*), especially from the *repentistas*, poets from Paraíba State (I have written about the topic elsewhere). This is part of the reason why I myself chose the *cordel* literature format, in order to talk about capoeiragem in this book.

It also had, considering the social sense of its songs and in its combative conceptions, a good deal of influence from military circles and also from the Brazilian (white) elites, especially from Bahia and Rio de Janeiro.

Not even close to offering a full analysis, I shall also add that the main reason why “Regional” Capoeira was spread both around Brazil and around the world is the fact that it was officially adopted by the Senzala Group, in Rio de Janeiro. This group (founded by young men from high medium classes from Rio) not only drank from Bahian sources, but also from many others, since they used to visit famous *rodas* held in Rio by masters such as Artur Emídio (who first brought Bahian Capoeira to Rio, but came from ..., not from Salvador), and other masters established in Rio de Janeiro’s Northern Zone, such as Zé Pedro, Mário Buscapé, Leopoldina and others.

They also took important influences, not always mentioned, but well known and documented, from the famous “utilitarian Capoeira” cultivated for decades in Southern Zone Rio de Janeiro by Agenor Sampaio, the legendary Master Sinhozinho, and his disciples, such as Rudolf Hermann and Neyder Alves, experts in other fighting arts, including practices oriented to *Vale-Tudo* and objective self-defense.

O “VALE-TUDO” DE ONTEM, PRO-FLAGELADOS

RUDOLF HERMANN E CARLSON GRACIE -- IMPRESSIONANTES !

**Quando acaba a tórça e só fica a raça
-- Espetáculo empolgante, mas selvagem -- O público queria a vitória do jovem capoeirista -- Renda: Cr\$ 86.000,00**

Constituiu um autêntico, porém selvagem, espetáculo, a notada de “vale tudo” realizada ontem, no Vasco, em benefício dos flagelados nordestinos. Há muitos anos o Rio não via coisa igual. Um espetáculo chocante,

var, porém, que todos os lutadores que tomaram parte (três da Academia Gracie e três avulsos) num belo exemplo de cavalheirismo evitaram os golpes mais esportivos e degenerescentes, tão como dedo nos olhos do adversário.



Today’s tendency in “Regional”, admittedly or not, has been to follow that “utilitarian” path. Many young “Regional” masters are walking towards what now has been called “MMA”, i.e., “Mixed Martial Arts.”

Considering the matter from another angle, yet within the current critical framework, Luta Regional Bahiana could hardly consider itself as the root of a popular phenomenon, of a folkloric nature. One of the basic principles of such phenomena is that folklore may not have any individual authorship, let alone well defined dates of birth and formally established rules.

Such fact is at the very root of the “love-and-hate” relation between *Luta Regional Bahiana* and traditional Capoeira, especially the one which became labeled “Capoeira Angola”. Without its historical roots, “Contemporary Capoeira” would lose part of its merits and sense, therefore the love relation. On the other hand, such stylized Capoeira, since from its beginning, would not hide that it came up in order to replace traditional Capoeira, for “being superior to it”, especially, in terms of efficiency (?) and aesthetic values (?). By the way, “Regional” experts not always hide such points of view, yet today.

Smartly, some “researchers-for-rent” started selling up the theory according to which, in fact, “Regional” and “Angola” are one and the same thing. They are not.

Some time ago, I asked to the clever and very much missed Mater Caiçara, why was it that in a true “Angola” *roda*, *nobody* would ever play “Regional” style Capoeira... His answer was short and sharp: “What for?”

In another occasion, while in New York, the Great Master João Grande gave me not much a different answer, which I transcribed in one of my articles, and at the Introduction of this little book’s 2nd Edition.

But how to explain, then, the astonishing success of such “Contemporary Capoeira” all over the world? In many ways. Having already listed some good reasons in my book *Capoeiragem no Rio de Janeiro – Sinhozinho e Rudolf Hermann* (p. 251), I would now put emphasis in the main reason, i.e. “the **Marketing-God**”, who now seems to command the whole world, inside and outside capoeiragem.

Contemporary Capoeira is mostly connected with the middle classes, and members of such classes know better than anyone else how to prepare projects focusing public and private financial support. Whoever would conduct a research on the matter, would easily confirm this, fair and square.

Anyone who had a chance to be in Paris in 2005 (the so-called Brazil & France Year), or in Germany during the Soccer World Cup, 2006, must have noticed the amount of stylized Capoeira present at the events. No doubts about it, in a great measure, that happened thanks to the merits of the masters taking part at such events, but also, thanks to a considerable and generous amount of public financial support which has been provided to some of the active Capoeira masters (and not to the others).

Inside Brazil, evidently, the effects of such evil marketing are yet more intense in the regions supposed to be historically privileged, in terms of capoeiragem practice, to the point in which States such as Maranhão, Pernambuco, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, to mention the most known cases, would make a good cash on fully invented versions of capoeiragem's history.

In Rio de Janeiro, city where I have been living for over sixty years, it has been sad to follow a total incapacity of the local Capoeira leaders, to present meaningful projects. An exception to that rule is the case of Mr. Luiz Antônio de Abreu, Master Grilo (from Associação de Capoeira Arte Nobre), who was able to produce an excellent Capoeira song cd, celebrating the merits of Rio's masters such as Sinhozinho & Hermann among others, who practiced Capoeira as a realistic fighting art. While I was closing this text, I also received a phone call from Mr. Geraldo Costa Filho, Master Gegê, an acute and objective researcher, announcing his new Capoeira composition, which helps throwing light on the obscure but crucial Capoeira combat between Master Bimba's “Regional” students from Salvador, and Master Sinhozinho's students from Rio.

Rigorously speaking, in spite and because of its efficiency-based discourse, Capoeira Regional still owes to the world some serious and irrefutable proof of its merits as an efficient fighting art. It is practically impossible to disagree with most of the experts of other fighting arts, when they affirm that Capoeira Regional is a theatrical fighting art. João Alberto Barreto, one of the most famous Jiu-Jitsu fighters from all times (I quoted him elsewhere) that 10-15 seconds would be enough to overcome any Capoeira Regional fighter. Of course, provided that the combat would not be fixed (“marmelada”), as it has happened in Capoeira Regional's history, documentation on which is now available (again, check my *Sinhozinho & Hermann* book, for the topic).

My criticism is not intended to be strictly directed to Master Bimba, Manoel dos Reis Machado, the acclaimed founder of “Luta Regional Baiana” or “Capoeira Regional”. Bimba was a very charismatic figure whom I had the privilege to meet for an a very revealing interview, which I conducted for my Capoeira program at Roquete Pinto Radio, in [ANO, COMPLETAR]. He was indeed instrumental in the process of modernizing capoeiragem. But he was a man of his time, and besides drinking in the source of traditional capoeiragem (“Angola”), he admittedly drank on the sources of Rio de Janeiro capoeiragem modernizing projects, which had been going on since at least the 1900's.

In a not always mentioned interview in 1936, Bimba himself, in the context of a capoeiragem discussion, that Rio de Janeiro was “a more advanced center”, and made reference to Master Zuma's book and sportive capoeiragem rules, published in 1927. Bimba also brought his students for a preliminary demonstration at the important 1935 Vale-Tudo main fight between Master Sinhozinho's student André Jansen against a Gracie Jiu-Jitsu

disciple, held at Salvador, Bahia. It should be obvious to any reasoning person that the fighting aspects that are supposed to make "Regional" special at Salvador were pretty much current in Rio de Janeiro for decades before Bimba opened his school and that Bimba drank from those sources, as he took influences from several imported fighting arts, such as Jiu-Jitsu, Judo, Savate etc. For all this discussed and documented, again, check my Sinhozinho & Hermanny book.

What I intend to criticize is not the man and his art themselves, but the myth built around him and around "Regional", by some of his students, which happened to be the ones who achieve most of the public recognition, and have been living out of an invented tradition, to use an expression popular these days, first used by Eric Hobsbawn. True, in the last decade of his life, Bimba did allow that mythical approach to grow up, but it is pretty clear by his sad end that he did not take much advantage of it, as others did and keep doing.

What should be criticized is deliberate falsified historiography, on the behalf of reinforcing that myth, together with all sorts of dishonest policies to which such historiography serves, at the expense, either of traditional capoeiragem from Salvador ("Angola"), or of other capoeiragem trends, either traditional or modernizing, coming from other States and sources, especially those from Rio de Janeiro, which have been severely oppressed within all the "official" capoeiragem research, with a few exceptions. I strongly recommend Prof. Luiz Sérgio Dias's works, besides my own writings, as antidotes to such narrow perspectives, and more researchers seem to be working out of them, inspite of all the patrolling attitude against any independent attitude.

What should also be criticized is the ambiguity between, **here**, a modernist discourse putting emphasis on a supposed "efficiency" of "Regional", when the aim is to criticize traditional and popular capoeiragem ("Angola"), or to justify aggressions against (some) of their performers; and **there**, a "traditionalist" discourse, putting emphasis on the fact that there is no discontinuity between "Regional" and "Angola", when the aim is to justify the fact that a standard "Regional" fighter would hardly be able to use much of his art in a realistic situation.

I'd also like to state clearly that there *are* excellent masters working in the "Regional" trend, who (consciously or not) have already perceived the importance of making adjustments in the art they practice and sell. After all, if life is dynamic and if folklore is dynamic (as Master Edison Carneiro used to remind us), why Capoeira Regional would not be?

We may notice in modern Capoeira trends (Regional and others) a curious and symptomatic bifurcation.

On one hand, young masters holding more attachments to a warrior profile are complementing their knowledge in schools of Jiu-Jitsu, Vale-Tudo etc. Even Sinhozinho's "Utilitarian" capoeiragem has been object of research for such purposes. I have been suggesting that *fighting-Capoeira labs* should be held, at Vale-Tudo practice gyms, such as *XGym & Black House*, in Rio (with the help of Masters such as Jorge Guimarães, Carlão Barreto, Rogério Camões and Valquenares Oliveira). Such labs could be promoted by *Premiere Combat* cable TV, and specialized fighting magazines, such as *O Tatame*. There is no doubt that in such contexts, the most adequate form of capoeiragem would turn out to be Sinhozinho's, if we would have the help of Valquenares (Hermanny's student) and other remaining experts.

On the other hand, masters holding more attachment to a profile oriented towards a tricky and acute game are deepening their knowledge of traditional versions of capoeiragem, noticeably, "Angola". Why not promoting *traditional Capoeira labs*, as well, now counting with the help of old masters from "Angola" and other traditional trends?

Back to the “Regional” efficiency issue, I would like to say that I have been traveling around the world, meeting capoeiragem masters and masters of all sorts of fighting arts, including those working with M.M.A. (“Mixed Martial Arts”), always asking them the same question. I ask the same question here in Rio, after all, today’s MMA, under the name of “Vale-Tudo”, was born in Rio, and for a while, preserved only in Rio suburbs.

Would “Luta Regional Baiana” be superior to all other fighting arts?

It is a matter of consensus, that Capoeira Regional would hardly win, either on a ring, or in any sports court, or even in a Capoeira “roda”, any sort of M.M.A. contest. So, regarding which context is it legitimate to affirm that Luta Regional Baiana is “efficient”?

Now coming back to the mentioned love for Capoeira, it drives the machine gun to turn also against some of the ways in which “traditional” Capoeira has been now cultivated, especially to the segment apparently more worried with negritude (black awareness) than with Capoeira itself.

As a matter of fact or of appearance, that much has to be admitted, “traditional” Capoeira (especially, “Angola”) will always have great advantage over “contemporary” Capoeira (especially “Regional”) , in terms of black awareness worries. Although “Regional” would largely use black symbology as an ideological flag, it naturally carries a tendency to turn Capoeira into a white and bourgeois practice. Has anybody ever participated on a great event promoted by the “Regional” leaderships in which negritude was presented as one of its mainly discussed themes?

It is clear that negritude is a factor which is, more than important, simply essential. However, it is also clear that the black movements inside Capoeira need to be strongly repaired. The first repair is classic and traditional, common to all such movements: The permanent risk of having its leaderships “co-opted”, so to speak, by “the enemy”. While having a chance to work on my M.A. in New York, I studied the theme with more attention, while writing a paper, “Black-White Society”. Professor David R. White liked it and gave me an A+! The theme was the so-called “professional leader”.

My main critique here is directed to the naïve Capoeira instructor, the folk that tends to cultivate, into practice, lots of gestures of African inspired gestures, especially those belonging to the world of religion experience. African salutations and gestures apparently secret in the beginning of a “volta ao mundo” are instances of such a trend, as well as discourses about slavery, ancient and modern.

My point is, I believe that it is just about time that we should take such sort of framework in a more up-dated and more deeply reflected way. It is time to let go such an outworn and superficial discourse, as the usual one, which bears prejudices even against the African cultures which it is supposed to worship.

By the same token, it is just about time that some masters would stop visiting African countries all the time, especially Angola, as if they would be true sorts of *caboclo* messiah, representing the mixed (and fascinating) Brazilian cultures. We tend to complain so much against “yank” cultural imperialism, only to end up doing the same thing, putting African cultures, either in the place of new colonizer, or in the place of colonized culture.

One of such masters, for instance, has been currently does plagiarism, while claiming originality. He went to Angola and came back to Brazil producing t-shirts and nicknames in the name of animals in extinction process. He never did care to remember, however that the African animal running the greatest danger of extinction is man himself, the African citizen.

At the same time, Students of the same master went all the way to the Indic Ocean, meeting “morenguists” from Reunion Islands, the players of ancient Moringue, without any doubts the grandfather practice of our Capoeira. The problem is, they went there in order to “teach authentic Capoeira”, that is to say, to teach them the whitened, bourgeois and domesticated version...

Those reflections take some of the most important dimensions right at this moment, since Brazilian Law # 10,369, issued in Jan. 09, 2003 (altering Law # 9,394, Dec. 20, 1996, establishing the basic national directives for education), in order to include at the official curriculum of Brazilian Public Schools, as a mandatory general theme, “Afro-Brazilian history and culture.” This is an initiative deserving all our praises, which shall include, as a discipline “Afro-Brazilian History of Capoeira.” It is reasonable, therefore, that Capoeira masters started dreaming with a chance within this emergent labor field.

Due to the importance of this context, even though adopting an unfriendly attitude (I seem to be doomed to do just that), at a conference I presented at *Estácio de Sá* University in Rio de Janeiro a couple of months ago, at the presence of many Capoeira masters interested on the topic, I defended that, to my own knowledge, there are only a few qualified Capoeira “instructors”, in order to handle such a discipline. At Salvador, someone like Pedro Morais, for instance, could do it, and at Rio, someone like Berg, and not much more than that.

Either that, or else folks would fulfill class time by playing berimbau, or singing the usual songs these days (generally, alienated and alienating), speaking about important legacies of the African cultures, such as *feijoada*, *baticum* and the *mulata*'s hips. Not denying such important influences, I tried at the occasion to point to the direction of what *could* be done. For that matter, I latter wrote the article “Receita para visitor Angola.”

My basic suggestion was attentively reading Nei Lopes's books, especially the most recent one, *KITÁBU, o livro do saber e do espírito negro-africano* (translating the title: KITÁBU, the book of Black-African knowledge and spirit). Volume I contains (translating to English): The Ancient Legacy – Black-African History and Traditions. This last part is further divided into: Congo, Mina, Tavrur, Sengambia, Ethiopia and Zambesia. Volume II is divided into four parts: Brazil, Rio da Prata, Hispanic Caribbean, French Caribbean, Surinam, British Caribbean and the United States. The book should be read over and over, by anyone considering being a teacher on the subject.

However, if I would be pressed to put emphasis on a subject to be more immediately be appreciated by Brazilian students, and closer to Capoeira, I would pick the collections of African proverbs. Those would help us to make evident to all of us (therefore, preventing us against) the discrete but typical prejudice, according to which, culturally, Africa only contributed with its “extravagant” religious rites, and not with some type of pure philosophy.

Without getting even close to present a complete repertoire, it is worthy to transcribe some of those proverbs, many of which seem to be made “by measure” to the Capoeira players. In order not to abuse much of space, let us limit ourselves to the regions of Congo, Mina and Ethiopia (although reading all of them, and reflecting upon them, would be absolutely fundamental):

1. Proverbs – Congo

- *I have mounted an elephant, friends came, the elephant died, friends left.*
- *What the heart keeps, the mouth does not say.*
- *A log may stay ten years in the water, but it will never be a crocodile.*
- *What one says on top of a dead lion, one not says to him alive.*
- *More the river is full, more it wants to grow.*
- *The teeth are smiling, but is it the heart?*

2. Proverbs – Mina

- *A proverb is the conversation's horse. When the conversation gets bored, a proverb carries it in its back.*
- *Only after crossing a river, may one laugh of the crocodile.*
- ***One lie damages a thousand truths.***

- *Hate is a disease with no medicine.*
- ***The dende tree is already tall; but who knows whether it will offer good fruits?***
- *Evil knows where evil hides.*
- *A hawk flies high, but he always returns to land.*

3. Proverbs – Ethiopia & Neighbor Regions

- *Impatient feet end up at the snake's nest.*
- *The silly man talks, the wise man listens.*
- *Too much modesty turns up to be hunger.*
- *He who can not walk, can not climb stairs.*
- *Poverty enslaves.*
- *A cat may enter a monastery, nevertheless, it is still a cat.*
- *A brother is a shoulder.*

Brazilian specialized books, such as Dr. Nei Lopes's, will certainly be a good start for the Capoeira-researcher who would want to escape from the quicksand swamp, made of fantasy and marketing, to which part of today's "gurus", including here some Ph.D.'s, have driven Capoeira's historiography.

It for a start, I would recommend an attentive reading of the book *A Manilha e o Libambo*, by the diplomat Alberto da Costa e Silva. It is a deep breath work, focusing on economical, political and geographical aspects, which would widen the vision of the master-researchers, who in a general way, are more oriented to the "folkloric" part of this history.

Elton Medeiros (show in the picture, with two of his fans), the great musical composer and poet, administrator, master (of Candombe, by the way) and a good friend, in a very good time, comes to my rescue, putting his admirable library at my disposal, recommending authors such as Altair Pinto, Arthur Ramos, Câmara Cascudo, Édison Carneiro, Roger Bastide, Nina Rodrigues and others, but most of all, putting special emphasis on Professor José Flávio Pessoa de Barros. This has increased my enthusiasm for two of the excellent works of this Professor: *Obaluajé, o banquete do Rei* and *A Fogueira de Xangô, o Orixá do Fogo*, fundamental books, for sure, which I had the chance to know thanks to the extraordinary *jongueiro-seresteiro* Lúcio Sanfilippo (check his work at Bar do Ernesto, Lapa, RIO, on every Friday). Those are mandatory readings to any Capoeira master with ambitions of being active in the implementation of Law # 10,369!



Before I would start digging even further, it is always good to remember that around South America we have a golden mine, in terms of African cultures. Uruguayan and Argentinian Candombe is a good example of that. In order to confirm it, one could read and hear Carlos Páez Vilaró (*Entre Colores y Tambores* and *Afrikandombe*), or else one could hear Cáceres – *Murga Argentina*, if possible reading the text that comes with it, by Juan Carlos Cáceres.

All this, I insist, only for a start. I would, however be highly recommended, the reading of African authors. For instance, of the works by the extraordinary *Pepetela* (Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana dos Santos): *As Aventuras de Ngunga* (1973), *A Revolta da Casa dos Ídolos* (1979), *O Cão e os Calus* (1985), *Yaka* (1984 in Brazil, 1985 in Portugal and Angola),

Lueji, o Nascimento de um Império (1989), *Luandando* (1990), *A Geração da Utopia* (1994), *A Montanha da Água Lilás, fábula para todas as idades* (2000) and so many others. Or else, José Luandino Vieira, or yet the young pop-African Ondjaki, only to mention no more than three names.

Not to stay only in Angola, I'd strengthen this list (which is far from being a complete one) with the name of the Moçambican Mia Couto (António Emílio Leite Couto), with special emphasis on *Os Sete Sapatos Sujos*.

Because Capoeira is much present in the United States, it would also be advisable to remember a thing or two on the classic literature on the saga of the African-Americans, such as *Soul on Ice*, by Eldridge; *Die, Nigger, Die*, by Rap Brown; *Growing Up Black*, edited by Jay David & Ragtime Doctorow; *From Plantations to Gheto*, August Méier & Elliot Ruwick; and among many others, Malcom X's *Autobiography*.

On the incredible South African experience, I know of no better book than *When the Lion Feeds & The Sound of Thunder*, by Wilbur Smith (which brought me to an unforgettable afternoon at Johnybourg, which ended in Paris, not in Madrit, as we had planed!).

Moving from one advice to another, I must state the importance of the Internet in this learning process, since there are extraordinary websites on the matter, such as, for instance, <http://www.casadeculturadamulhernegra.org.br>, where I was able to find a brilliant report from Conselho Nacional de Educação, on "Curricular Directives for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of African-Brazilian and African History and Culture." The report quotes Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*), a warrior that happened, just like our Vinícius de Moraes, to be a white man with a black soul, although Fanon was a poet and Vinícius a journalist.

Mr. Cenésio Feliciano Peçanha, from Baixada Fluminense and from the World, extraordinary capoeira and researcher, has recently made his way to Angola, together with a Ph.D. specialist in this fascinating area. Who knows, wether we will have extraordinary results, much above the speculations we are here no more than summarizing? Let us hope so.

We sould hope so, for such new perspective could certainly help us to promote some important corrections, here in our Brazil.

The fact is, most of the defenders and popularizers of Master Bimba's Capoeira are totally lost (although they pretend they aren't), in terms of knowing how to preserve it, and how to make it progress. Bimba certainly would be doing all this very well, if he would be alive. A good part of the "Angoleiros" is equally lost, living out of a past which is more "folkloric" than Afro-Brazilian.

As we say in Brazil, it all "ends in pizza" for the "gurus", or else in demagogic "basic kits" for any occasional hungry folk passing by the door of a Capoeira congress, or in front of a TV camera. What we don't miss, are "inclusion" projects specialized in exclusion.

The other kinds, currents, styles and Capoeira "trademarks", I have no doubts, have already noticed that it is just about time that we should overcome sameness, leaving behind this child-juvenile phase (commercial cult of the past, fantasy versions etc.) and finally to enter in capoeiragem's adult period.

For all this to happen, there certainly are ways, and even good solutions. As I defend in this "cordel", Capoeira, wisely, has a sage and a solid mechanism of auto-preservation.

Let us move to the booklet.