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ENGOLO AND CAPOEIRA: FROM ETHNIC TO DIASPORIC COMBAT GAMES IN THE SOUTHERN ATLANTIC

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a re-examination of the main Afrocentric narrative of capoeira origins, the engolo or 'Zebra Dance', in light of historical primary sources and new ethnographic evidence gathered during fieldwork in south-west Angola. By examining engolo's bodily techniques, its socio-historical context and cultural meanings, the piece emphasises its insertion into a pastoral lifestyle and highlights the relatively narrow ethnic character of the practice in Angola. This analysis and the comparison with capoeira helps us to develop certain hypotheses about the formation, migration, and re-invention of diasporic combat games between southern Angola and coastal Brazil, and more broadly, to increase our understanding of how African cultures spread across the southern Atlantic.

INTRODUCTION: THE ZEBRA DANCE, OR CAPOEIRA'S FOUNDATIONAL MYTH

Capoeira is the only martial art of African origin practised on a global scale. Its successful expansion from Brazil to the rest of the world has also fuelled a growing body of research on the art and its history. Identifying specific African ancestors for capoeira, however, remains a thorny issue. This article provides a re-examination of the main Afrocentric narrative of capoeira's origins, the *engolo* or 'Zebra Dance', in light of new evidence gathered during fieldwork in south-west Angola. By analysing *engolo*'s bodily techniques, social context and cultural meanings, and comparing it with capoeira, I aim to develop some new hypotheses about the formation, migration and re-invention of diasporic combat games between southern Angola and coastal Brazil, and more broadly, to increase our understanding of how African cultures spread across the southern Atlantic. This in turn helps us to understand capoeira's capacity for global dissemination in the late twentieth century.

Capoeira was first documented among enslaved Africans and creoles in late colonial Rio de Janeiro and expanded – despite periodic clamp-downs by the police – to the free underclasses of the Brazilian cities in the course of the nineteenth century.¹ From the 1930s onwards the two modern styles of capoeira, 'Regional' and 'Angola', developed in Bahia and were disseminated during the 1950s to 1970s to the rest of the country whilst undergoing further changes. Contemporary capoeira styles have been propagated in the US and Western Europe since the 1970s, and spread to many other countries over recent decades. Today millions of young people of all genders practise capoeira, all over the world.

The widespread use of symbols of Brazilian identity (flags, belts using the national colours of green, yellow and blue) and its songs in Brazilian Portuguese suggests that capoeira today is an 'authentic' expression of Brazilian-ness, and indeed it is often marketed as such [Delamont, Stephens and Campos 2017: 158–174]. There is little doubt that capoeira functions as a strong ambassador for Brazilian culture and language. The dominant narrative of its history and origins emphasises its invention and further development on Brazilian soil, and its traditional as well as more recent songs praise its Brazilian heroes, or resistance against slavery. Yet there is another, more Afrocentric, narrative. Early twentieth-century practitioners in Salvador da Bahia associated capoeira with enslaved Angolans, as Brazilian folklorists such as Manuel Querino and Edison Carneiro have highlighted. Artur Ramos [1954: 121] was the first anthropologist who tried to identify specific African ancestors for capoeira.² Yet until the 1960s this approach met with little success, as no association with African practices seems to have persisted in the memory of the art's practitioners beyond a generic association with Angola, and its particularly close links to the 'Bantu' nations of the

Afro-Bahian religion Candomblé [Assunção 2015].

The idea of *engolo* as the ancestor of capoeira was first promoted by a Luso-Angolan painter, Albano Neves e Sousa, during his first visit to Brazil in 1965. The son of a Portuguese colonial administrator, Neves e Sousa grew up in Luanda, and studied at the Fine Arts School in Porto (1944–52). On his return to Angola he became, in his own words, 'fascinated by what he saw', and decided to stay in what was then still a Portuguese colony, rather than to take up work in the metropolis.³ Working as ethnographic collector for a local museum in Angola, he spent years travelling all over the colony, sketching its landscapes, people and customs, which then constituted the subjects of oil paintings he exhibited and sold for a living. In 1965 he was invited to visit Brazil, another formative experience for him, as he became aware of the country's numerous cultural links with Angola. From that moment onwards, his wider objective was to show that Angola was the 'mother' of Brazil, not only in biological but also in cultural terms, thus essentially prefiguring the notion of a Black Southern Atlantic [Neves e Sousa n.d.]. Seeing capoeira in Salvador, he was struck by the similarities with the combat game called *engolo* he had seen and drawn in Mucope, a village near the Kunene river in south-west Angola. Inevitably, he identified *engolo* as the forerunner from which capoeira had derived. Of course he shared his idea with the masters of the capoeira schools he visited, in particular Mestre Pastinha. Pastinha, the most prominent teacher of Angola-style capoeira, wholeheartedly adopted it and started to tell his students about *engolo*.⁴

Another prominent supporter of the theory that *engolo* represented the origin of capoeira was the folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo, a personal friend of Neves e Sousa since the former's visit to Luanda in 1963. Cascudo included a chapter on the *engolo* story in his classic book on Brazilian folklore [1967], extensively quoting Neves e Sousa, and added a short description of *engolo* to the entry 'Capoeira' in the new edition of his seminal *Dicionário de Folclore* [1972]. Pastinha and Cascudo were together the people most responsible for the *engolo* story trickling down to capoeiristas and being incorporated into one variant of the emic discourse of capoeira origins. In particular practitioners of the Angola style from the GCAP group, linked to the re-emerging Brazilian Black Movement, enthusiastically adopted it during the 1980s, because it finally allowed them to confront the Brazilian nationalist narrative with a concrete example, rather than only referring to vague and generic African origins [Peçanha 2019, 2021].

The *engolo* story also proved attractive to Afrocentric scholars in the United States, who were underscoring the importance of African input in the combat games of the Black Atlantic [Thompson 1987, 1991; Dossar 1992; Dawson 1994]. Its most elaborated version was produced by T. J. Desch-Obi, who dedicated large parts of his Ph.D. dissertation to the idea, followed by articles and book chapters to prove that capoeira was nothing more than a slightly altered form of *engolo*, just as

1 For detailed studies of nineteenth-century capoeira in Rio de Janeiro, see Holloway [1989], Soares [1999, 2001] and in Bahia, Abreu [2005].

2 See also Edison Carneiro's letter to Artur Ramos in Oliveira and Lima [1987: 89]. For more on the development of capoeira master-narratives, see Assunção [2005: chap. 1].

3 'Voltei fascinado pelo que vi'. Handwritten manuscript, collection M. Luisa Neves e Sousa.

4 Pedro Morais da Trindade (Mestre Moraes), interview, 7.4. 2011.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu is derived from Japanese jiu-jitsu [2000, 2008, 2012]. Desch-Obi was the first researcher who managed to visit some engolo practitioners in the Kunene region in 1997, and he also unearthed an impressive amount of primary and secondary sources to prove his point. He asserts that ‘the martial art under the term e’ngolo [sic] can be dated to the close of the settlement of the Kunene floodplains sometime before the twelfth century’ and that the practice ‘evolved from the cosmological understanding of *kalunga* as an inverted ancestor world’ [2008: 37, 38]. The problem is that Desch-Obi uncritically merges sources from different centuries, juxtaposing late twentieth-century descriptions of engolo with accounts from the time of the slave trade dealing with other issues. He describes an atemporal ‘Kunene people’, and their ‘pastoral pugilism’, as if the culture and the combat games in that region would not have been affected by the dramatic changes of the last two centuries. Moreover, he does not problematise the fact that not one single primary source we know of mentions engolo or describes a combat game with foot kicks prior to Neves e Sousa’s testimony from the 1950s. Furthermore, whilst virtually all pastoralists in south-west Angola and adjacent areas practise stick fighting and combat games using open hands, only one out of the many ethnic groups in the whole region is known to have practiced engolo – the Nkhumbi.⁵ Why then, it must be asked, would a practice restricted to a very small ethnic group have spread to all other African ethnic groups that were enslaved in Brazil, and their creole descendants?

The approach adopted here is different. Instead of fusing inconsistent information into an apparently coherent narrative that informs a fundamentalist account popular among some capoeiristas, this paper attempts to reflect on these contradictions in order to establish the extent to which sources support the idea of a monogenetic origin for capoeira, or rather suggest alternative lines of development. Therefore I first examine the history of the Nkhumbi, who are the only ethnic group in Angola among whom engolo practice is documented. This then provides the context for the description and ethnographic analysis of engolo movements, games, music and rituals, based on interviews with

elderly practitioners and highlighting some of its distinctive features. In the final section I compare and contrast engolo with capoeira, present evidence suggesting that small, yet significant, numbers of Nkhumbi were taken to Brazil, and propose two hypotheses regarding the transatlantic links of capoeira. This paper thus combines historical and ethnographic material and methods to contend that there is no necessary close correspondence between numbers from the slave trade and degree of influence upon slave culture in the Americas. The argument is that minority practices could constitute the core of creole developments, as long as they provided adequate responses to new needs, could accommodate other contributions, and establish cultural meanings adapted to the new historical context.

1. THE NKHUMBI IN SOUTH-WEST ANGOLA

1.1. Precolonial Humbe states

The Angolan south-western territories – corresponding to the present-day provinces of Namibe, Huila and Kunene and parts of Benguela – were among the last to be conquered by the Portuguese. Early occupation of the area around the port of Benguela (founded in 1617) resulted in a profitable slave trade and the establishment of fortresses (*presídios*) with a Portuguese presence along a trade route into the Ovambo-populated central highlands (today Huambo and Bié provinces). But that didn’t significantly advance Portuguese control of the Angolan south-west. It was the foundation of Moçâmedes, located further south, in 1849–50 by Portuguese settlers from Pernambuco (Brazil), which provided the basis for the subsequent occupation of the Huila plateau. Treaties – seen by the Africans as sealing friendship, whilst by the Portuguese as accepting vassalage – were signed with Mwila and Gambwe rulers of present-day Lubango and its adjacent area to the south in the 1850s [Pelissier 1997: 179ff].

⁵ This issue is completely omitted from Desch-Obi’s accounts, where the homogenising terms ‘Bangala’ and then ‘Kunene people’ are used. Furthermore, the most important ethnographer of south-west Angola, Charles Estermann, does not mention engolo, either in his copious three-volume study on the peoples of that region [1956-61] or any of his numerous articles [1983].

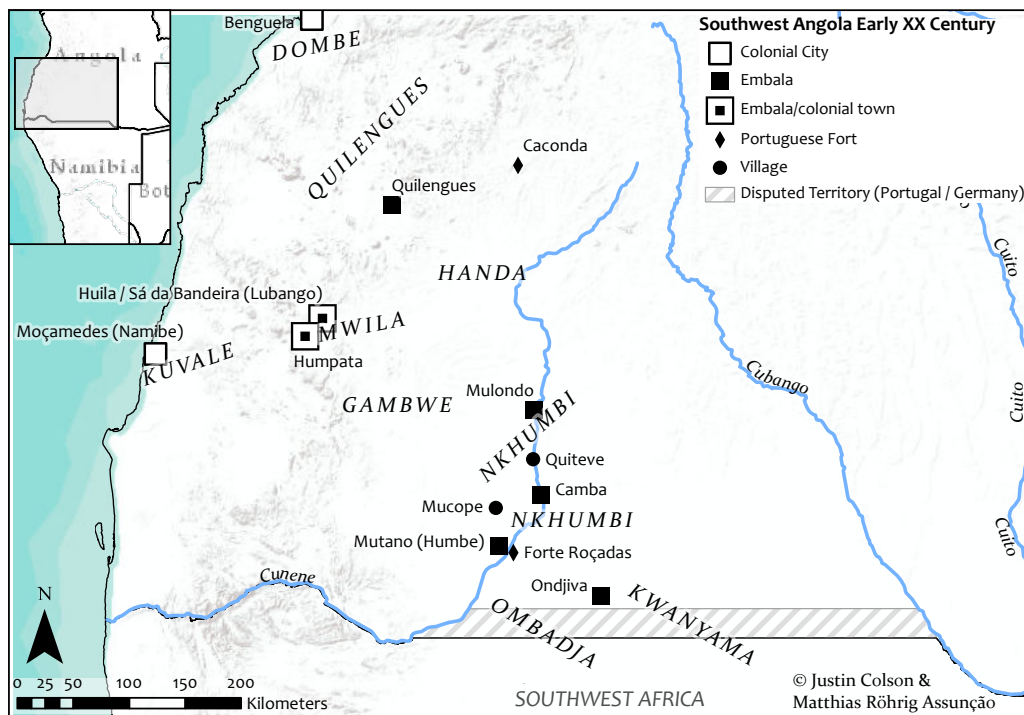


Figure 1: Southwest Angola, Early XX Century

Yet the territories further to the south, up to the shores of the Kunene river, still remained completely outside European control. A Humbe kingdom in this area from at least the seventeenth century is mentioned in colonial sources. Jaga (or Ibangala) conquerors are said to have founded Mwila in the highlands of Huila and Lu-nkumbi on the Kunene plains [Estermann 1960: 29]. Humbe-inene, the name of the legendary founder of this kingdom, became the title of the Humbe rulers. First evidence of interaction with Europeans only dates from the 1770s, when the Humbe ruler prevented the Portuguese and their African allies (*quimbares*) from entering his territory in the search of ivory and wax.⁶ At the same time, Humbe traders offered gifts to the Portuguese governor of Benguela so they would be allowed to sell enslaved people in the Portuguese port. It is likely that this amounted to a kind of tribute paid indirectly by the Humbe ruler [Candido 2013: 186]. From at least this period, the Humbe state was involved in the transatlantic slave trade. As Joseph Miller has shown, various trade routes led out of the Humbe area. Initially enslaved people were taken up the Kunene river and then to Caconda, a Portuguese fortified outpost (*presídio*) and from there to the port of Benguela. A second route passed through the Huila plateau towards Moçâmedes, and from the 1780s onwards a third route went down the Kunene towards its estuary, where enslaved

people were sold to French traders. According to Miller, the Humbe traders mainly sold ivory and only intermittently raided and enslaved the neighbouring Mwila and Gambwe populations of the highlands [Miller 1988: 221–2, 225–6, 603; 2002: 36 (Fig. 1.5), 52, 57 (Fig. 1.6); Candido 2013: 260].

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the so-called Nano wars in the Angolan south-west resulted in a massive increase in slave raiding and trading, as well as migration and restructuring of the existing states [Estermann 1960: 31–2; Pelissier 1997: 177–201]. When the slave trade to Brazil was abolished (1850), the Nkhumbi were living in three polities, or ‘lands’ (*terras*), as contemporary Portuguese sources called the ‘kingdoms’ of Humbe, Camba and Mulondo, each governed by its *soba* [Brochado 1867: 187]. It seems it was only then that Europeans first entered these territories and left the earliest written descriptions of their inhabitants. Bernardino Brochado, a Portuguese merchant who established an outpost in the neighbouring Gambos, estimated the population of Humbe then at 60–70,000, of Mulondo at 16–18,000 and of Camba at 7–8,000. [Brochado 1855: 207–8. Valdez 1861: 354–6 provides similar numbers]. He also noted that ‘frequent wars’ with neighbours had left the population greatly diminished. This suggests that Nkhumbi were not only trading enslaved people, but were also sold into slavery during the first half of the nineteenth century, as discussed below.

⁶ Letter by *capitão-mor* José Antônio Nogueira, 22 June 1771. Coleção IHGB DL81, 02.18. I am grateful to Mariana Candido for providing me with a transcription of this document.

Colonial Portuguese commerce with the Nkhumbi led to the arrival of some European ambulant traders (*funantes*) in the Humbe area in the second half of the nineteenth century. As part of Portuguese minister Sá da Bandeira's wider colonial expansion strategy, a fort was founded at Humbe in 1859. But only four years later it had to be abandoned, as the Portuguese had no resources to guarantee the outpost's safety.⁷ Only in 1880 did the Portuguese re-occupy the fort and attempt to establish a permanent presence on the Kunene river, part of their strategy to have their territorial ambitions recognised by Germany and other rival colonial powers. Yet from 1885 to 1915 they faced fairly fierce resistance from the various peoples they were trying to bring under their yoke. The most difficult task was to subdue the Ovambo peoples, who still enjoyed political independence between the two expanding colonial empires of Germany and Portugal. The Cuamato (or Ombadja) were crushed and nearly extinguished in 1907; the Kwanyama subdued only in 1915. Even against the Nkhumbi, said to be more 'friendly' to whites, three wars had to be waged (1885–88, 1891, 1897–98) in order to achieve their total submission. In the Portuguese accounts, tyrannical *sobas* are usually held responsible for initiating hostilities, and indeed it seems that the three Nkhumbi *sobados* were rarely united in their fight against the Portuguese, who relied massively on African allies and mercenaries in their campaigns. The Portuguese systematically burned down homesteads and seized any cattle they could get hold of, making these conflicts particularly devastating for pastoralists such as the Nkhumbi. Subjection to formal Portuguese rule, moreover, did not end raids and enslavement. Although slavery had officially been abolished in the Portuguese colonies in 1879, small-scale raids continued well into the twentieth century on both sides of the Kunene river, and captured people were kept as *serviçais* (servants) in conditions akin to slavery, forced into five-year labour contracts and even sold to toil on cacao plantations in other colonies, for example to São Tomé.⁸ Hence coerced labour akin to slavery was deeply engrained into the fabric of the various indigenous and colonial societies in south-west Angola at the turn of the century.

As a result of the raids and wars, but also of cattle disease present in the area since 1890, a great famine in south-west Angola further decimated the Nkhumbi and neighbouring peoples in 1915–16 [Clarence-Smith 1979: 76–7]. To escape disaster, a number of them migrated to the north [Estermann 1960: 22, 25, 45].⁹ As a result, the Nkhumbi population in the Kunene region, which numbered around 90,000 in the 1850s, and at least 120,000 in 1888, dropped to only 10,000 by 1936, only slightly recovering to 12,000 by 1940.¹⁰

7 Douglas Weeler and René Pelissier distinguish two phases of colonial expansion: 1836–61 and 1877–91 [Weeler and Pelissier 2011: 89–104]. For the 'reflux' of 1861–77, see Pelissier [1997: II, 186ff].

8 For slavery on both sides of the Kunene, see Clarence-Smith [1979: 29–31], Gustafsson [2005], Zollmann [2010].

9 There is a Nyaneka sub-group called Quilengues-Humbis, which probably resulted from Nkhumbi migrations to that area.

10 Population estimates are taken from Brochado [1855], Wunenberger [1888: 224] and Estermann [1960: 24–5]. Wunenberger's estimate is for Humbe only, without Mulondo and Camba.

1.2. Colonisation, assimilation and evolution of ethnic identities

The new Republican regime in Portugal, established in 1910, tried to eradicate compulsory labour akin to slavery in the colonies, but without great success. The incorporation of the Angolan south-west into colonial society was not followed by major economic transformations, and the 1920s to 1940s were rather years of economic stagnation [Clarence-Smith 1979: 97–8]. Colonisation by white settlers was strongest in the area around Huila, where the native Mwila lost their best lands. Further south the Nkhumbi managed, for the time being, to hold on to most of their land. The pressure to pay tax, though, forced many to accept work within the new colonial labour system. As *contratados* they became migrant workers, at least during part of their early adulthood [Medeiros 1976].

Spiritans missionaries, already present in the area since the mid-nineteenth century, expanded their missions and presence among the Nyaneka and Nkhumbi after 'pacification'. The missionaries' attitudes were contradictory. According to Clarence-Smith these missionaries 'were particularly unsympathetic to African culture and aspirations in this area' and were unable to mediate between settlers and the Nyaneka [Clarence-Smith 1979: 85]. The Spiritans themselves judged the peoples of south-west Angola difficult to convert [Lang and Tastevin 1937: viii]. Yet at the same time some of them, in particular Alphonse Lang and Charles Estermann, deeply empathised with the indigenous population and carried out unique in-depth studies of their cultures.¹¹ As Iracema Dulley [2008: 72–3] has suggested, it may be useful to distinguish three, quite different, types of missionary: bureaucrats, ethnologists and lovers of the wilderness.

All nineteenth and early twentieth-century authors clearly distinguished between the Nyaneka on the one hand and the Nkhumbi on the other. Both Henri Chatelain and Diniz Ferreira, authors of the first ethnographic classifications, who worked independently from each other, listed them as two of the core groups in what were commonly referred to as the 'tribes of the interior of Moçâmedes'.¹² Some authors suggested that the Nkhumbi were, by culture and language, closer to the Kwanyama. Yet the near-complete genocide of some groups in the Angolan south-west, and migration across the border [Kreike 2004] and significant loss of former demographic importance for many others, led to a re-drawing of ethnic boundaries, at least from above. The Spiritan father and researcher Carlos Estermann, author of the monumental three-volume study of the peoples of south-west Angola referred to

11 See Estermann [1956–61, 1983] and Lang and Tastevin [1937]. Because of the War of Liberation and subsequent civil wars, almost no further in-depth research has been done in the region since then. The major exception is the work by Carvalho 1999 on the Kuvale.

12 Lang and Tastevin, *Les Va-nyaneka* [1937: 10]. Lang and Tastevin asserted that the Nkhumbi were not counted among the Nyaneka. For an overview of ethnic classifications in Angola, see Virgilio Coelho [2015: 1–14].

above, decided to amalgamate the various Nyaneke and Nkhumbi sub-groups into one category, the Nyaneke-Humbe. Estermann justified his amalgamation by racial, ethnic and linguistic criteria. Although these had, according to his own assessment, 'no mathematical rigour', his classification was embraced by José Redinha in his influential study, became the official norm by the 1960s, and has continued to be so since.¹³ This does make sense for various reasons, not least the fact that even by combining all the smaller groups into one – the Nyaneke-Humbe – they still represent only 4% of the total Angolan population. Yet to this day, most people from the various ethnic groups that were included in the Nyaneke-Humbe still primarily identify themselves by those smaller identities, such as Handa or Mwila, and reject the official classification. Rosa Melo [2005], for instance, highlights the discrepancy between that label and the identities of social actors on the ground. As we will examine in more detail below, this is important insofar as *engolo* is one of the defining traits of the Nkhumbi, given that none of the other sub-groups of the Nyaneke-Humbe practise it.

1.3. Military skills, weapons and combat games in south-west Angola

Among the reasons that contributed to the remarkable resilience shown by many peoples from south-west Angola in the face of Portuguese conquest, their combat skills certainly were of key importance. So what can we say about their martial traditions, how these evolved and the role that combat games played therein? As Desch-Obi [2008:31] rightly emphasised, men from the Kunene plains learned to use weapons from an early age, in order to herd and protect their cattle, to assert themselves among their peers and – until conquest – to prepare for war and raids. Traditional weapons in the region were sticks, knobkerries (clubs with one thicker, round end), spears and bows and arrows, an assortment of which men would carry around for any eventuality.¹⁴ During the colonial period, Europeans in Angola often judged that the further south one moved, the more 'barbarous' and belligerent the people became (except, of course, the San people, always considered inferior to the Bantu). The Kwanyama and other Ovambo groups established along and south of the Kunene river were hence often represented as living in the most 'primitive' state of all Bantu peoples [Brochado 1855: 191; Dulley 2008: 53]. Yet when the Kwanyama, strategically located on the border between two colonial empires, managed to obtain significant quantities of rifles, they became the most formidable threat to both German and Portuguese colonial control of the region. The Nkhumbi also adopted firearms decades before they were subjected by the Portuguese, and this likewise enhanced their military power. Among the Nyaneke-Nkhumbi the Gambwe are usually described as the most belligerent, whereas the

Nkhumbi are seen as slightly more 'civilised' than their neighbours. In reference to their martial skills Brochado, one of the first Europeans to know the area well, insisted that the Nkhumbi used spears but were 'not very able with this weapon' [1855: 191]. They also had firearms, but were too 'relaxed' to carry enough ammunition. 'Yet they are the heathen known to be best at the cudgel game, and for that reason are respected by the others; there are Negroes who are so experienced, that if they want to hit a small target with the head or with the end of the handle, they can do this from a distance of sixty to eighty feet!!' [191] This extraordinary skill of the Nkhumbi was also highlighted more than half a century later by Diniz Ferreira [1918: 440].

The historical literature provides, however, much less information regarding combat games. One form, the open-hand fight (or slap boxing) was apparently widely practised in the past and still can be found today across the whole region, from the Ovimbundu in the highlands to the Kwanyama in Namibia. Known by various names (*khandeka*, *mbangula*, *kambangula*) it is carried out by two contestants surrounded by a circle of players and bystanders, who incentivise them with hand-clapping, singing and shouting. According to present-day informants, it is and was primarily practised by boys, adolescents and young adults alike, a date confirmed by early twentieth-century historical sources.¹⁵

Another common practice was stick fighting. According to Nogueira, who lived for twelve years among the Gambwe and Nkhumbi, this was also used to settle disputes between two adults.¹⁶ One of the best descriptions of pastoralist boys' 'training for war' is provided by Edwin Loeb, who carried out fieldwork among the Kwanyama in 1947–48. He mentions various combat games: knobkerry fighting (*onhandeka*), throwing, target shooting and a cattle raiding game. Loeb [1962: 81–2] also highlights how these games had already changed by then: 'Kwanyama men no longer have occasion for their war dance and the boys today "box" one another with open palms in fun, and no one gets hurt'. In other words, the practice of combat games changed according to new needs, and it is likely that many of them have disappeared as they no longer served their original purpose.

In summary, European sources regarding the various ethnic groups in south-west Angola are reasonably attentive to military skills until their conquest and submission, even though their observations remain of course impressionistic and are never systematic. These accounts by Europeans may be tainted by colonialist prejudice and racial hierarchisation, but can still provide us with some insights. They allow us to conclude, for example, that although agro-pastoralists living in south-west Angola or northern Namibia shared a number of military

13 See Estermann [1956-57: 13–14] and Redinha [1971: 25] for the 'grupo Nyaneka-Humbe'. For Estermann's influence on Redinha and subsequent classifications, see Coelho [2015: 6].

14 For the Kwanyama, see [Loeb 1962: 85], Tönnies [1996: 56–9]; for the Kuvale, Valdez [1861, II: 323]; see also Brochado [1867].

15 Estermann [1960, II: fig. 98] does not describe it, but reproduces a photograph showing two Nyaneke boys practising *kambangula*.

16 Nogueira [1881: 269]. Desch-Obi [2008: 34] cites this passage, but does not differentiate between the improvised stick (*vara*) used here, and the more elaborated cudgel (*porrinho*).

combat traditions (weapon types and corresponding skills), there was still considerable variation according to ethnic group. Not all traditional weapons (bows, spears, daggers, clubs, etc.) were used by every group, and some distinguished themselves in the particularly skilful use of a specific weapon – for example the knobkerry, as we have seen in the case of the Nkhumbi. Differences in fighting skills and military might between the peoples of the Kunene plains and Huila highlands were further accentuated by unequal access to modern Western weapons, a feature often highlighted by contemporary ethnographers. For example, the Kwanyama are always singled out as the most heavily armed with European rifles and ammunition, one of the reasons why they were able to oppose the fiercest and most successful resistance to Portuguese and German colonisers.¹⁷

2. LEARNING ENGOLO MOVEMENTS

Although *engolo* seems to have been closely associated with the Nkhumbi since time immemorial (at least in oral memory), historical records are, as noted previously, silent regarding it. The earliest known – and until recently only – source for this combat game in which players kick at their opponents is the brief description by Neves e Sousa, along with his drawings, already mentioned above. This dearth of records makes it very difficult to situate *engolo* among other martial traditions of south-western Angola, and still less to assess its dissemination in the region at the time of the transatlantic slave trade.

Hence our description and analysis of *engolo* will rely mostly on oral testimonies from a group of about fifteen men and some women in their sixties, seventies and eighties, who were interviewed in 2006, 2010 and 2011. All the men had been practitioners prior to the outbreak of civil war in 1975, and the women had watched it and some had been married to practitioners. The Angolan civil war was particularly disruptive in the Cunene province as it escalated into the so-called South African Border War. Because the armed wing of the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) had used frontier areas in Angola for strategic retreat and as operational basis, the South African Apartheid regime, which at the time also controlled South West Africa, started armed incursions into Angola in 1978, and in 1980 the SADF (South African Defence Force) occupied a large part of Cunene province, until the Tripartite Accord in 1988 resulted in the retreat of South African and Cuban troops from Angolan territory. Moreover, the UNITA, the armed opposition to the MPLA which had its stronghold in Ovimbundu areas in the central highlands, took advantage of the situation to bring large areas of the Angolan Southwest,

in particular in Benguela province, under its control. Our interlocutors in Cunene province often remembered that during these ten years of warfare, they could not gather for celebrations, and often not even light fires nor make noises. People were interrogated and mishandled, and most adult men recruited into the FAPLA, the armed forces of the Angolan MPLA government. These circumstances made celebrations with *engolo* inviable. Even after the withdrawal of South African troops in 1988, the civil war lingered on until 2003. Hence reconstruction of the infrastructure in the area only slowly started after this date. At this stage younger generations of men, having not been familiarised with *engolo* until then, showed little interest in taking up practice, especially as the introduction of television and later internet opened up a whole new world which seemed to attach no importance to traditional Nyaneka-Nkhumbi culture.

Hence most of our interlocutors had not played *engolo* since the civil war and the South African incursions of 1978-88 – the important exception being one group in Humbe, the former headtown of the most important Nkhumbi chieftain (then known as Mutano). At all other times and locations (Mucope, Quiteve and isolated homesteads in the wider Nkhumbi-speaking area) our own arrival for research purposes was therefore the occasion for a revival of *engolo*. However, in 2010 three groups formed in and around Mucope and re-started practice, enlisting some younger men, which we saw playing in 2011. It is of course difficult to assess how this period of inactivity affected the practitioners' memory of their art. We felt that the importance *engolo* had for many of them in their early adult life – not only as a pastime they enjoyed, but also a central tenet of their culture, as discussed below – they remembered *engolo* with particular fondness. Their bodily memory also surprised us, as many of these elderly men were able to remember and perform movements that are physically quite demanding such as high-raising legs and jumps.

All of our interlocutors concurred that *engolo* was practised mainly by adult men, in conjunction with their work as herders. Younger men practised on their own or under the instruction of elders in the corral next to the homestead during moments of rest. During the dry season, the cattle were put to graze on the *sambos* (more distant pastures) and training also took place here. During the dry season pastoralists could also practise *engolo* on the sand of riverbanks.

Engolo was not for children, and only exceptionally for adolescents. Whilst the slap boxing *khandeka* was practised since early childhood, most practitioners we spoke to only learned *engolo* between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five: '*Khandeka* starts in childhood. Later, when they reach the age of these kids there in the car, they can initiate *engolo*... at eighteen, nineteen years'.¹⁸

¹⁷ For a detailed study of how the Kwanyama resisted Portuguese, German and British colonialism by moving south and north of the colonial border and reshaping their natural environment, see Kreike [2004]. For a political and cultural history of the impact of guns in Central Africa, see Macola [2016].

¹⁸ Utomba Chindonga, interview [29.8.2011]. Lumbolene Kihapela, interview, 9.8.2010, only started to learn when he was twenty-five. In the following, all dates next to names refer to the day of formal, recorded interviews.

However, if an adolescent was very keen to learn *engolo*, he may have watched the older ones practise in the corral, even at the risk of being told off: 'we went to watch. Until they [the older ones] say "Go and fetch the cattle!"¹⁹ What emerges clearly from all accounts is that there was no pressure to learn, neither from the family nor from the clan. Rather each individual needed to find his own motivation, and go in search of somebody older for instruction:

He teaches you, he teaches you, and when you walk around you also do [keep training]. They [the older ones] will not call you. You yourself have to go there, if you have it [*engolo*] in your heart. When they go to the corral [to play], they have already learned. [Muhalambadji Moendangola 6.8.2010]

The optional nature of this learning, at a relatively late stage in life, probably contributed to the decline of the tradition after 1970, at least according to practitioners.

Practitioners mention three core locations for apprenticeship. The corral near the *kimbo* (compound), the riverbanks and the *sambos*, or distant pastures, where herders spent many months away from home:

When we played there in the *sambos*, the older ones sat down and brought us a bucket of sour milk to drink. We drank that milk and continued to kick each other. Like this the older ones, sitting, looked at us in the *sambo*. [Patrício Vilawaliwa 17.8.2011]

There seems not to have existed any formal recognition for *engolo* teacher. Most interlocutors mentioned that various 'older ones' (*mais velhos* in Portuguese) instructed those keen to learn together:

At first, it is just [young people] learning it by themselves. Then they go to the oldest, where they dance *engolo*, and get guidance, that it can't be like this, or like that. It's enough that you do something which is not [proper *engolo*] and the oldest will correct you: 'not like that, but like this' ... So first the young people will train, and at a celebration, they will wait to enter. Because there will be an older one who will know and help you to learn it. [Maurício Mumbalo 3.8.2010]

One informant used the term *munongo* for more experienced players, which refers to a person who excels at something, or is a specialist. Yet further enquiries with other practitioners left no doubt that a kind of

formal mastership was unknown of in *engolo*.²⁰

One quality highlighted by more experienced players we interviewed is that *engolo* is best learned by people who have 'a light heart', meaning they aren't easily upset if kicked by an opponent:

For a person to be good at *engolo*, he needs to have a light heart. If he receives a strong kick, and he is bad, he will try to fight. And then he does not learn well. [Kahani Waupeta 3.8.2010]

Just as capoeira is based on the *ginga*, contemporary *engolo* relies on some basic steps, which provide the basis for offensive and defensive movements. Yet unlike the *ginga*, *engolo* practitioners move around in little jumps, often remaining in a sideways-on position. They jump backwards, forwards and sideways, sometimes with one leg extended. Hands may help to avoid a kick, but are kept relatively close to the upper body.



Figure 2: *Engolo* jump by Kahani Waupeta, Mucope, 2010. © by Author & M Cobra Mansa

²⁰ This contrast with the claim made by Desch-Obi [2008: 41] that a formal mastership existed in *engolo*.

¹⁹ Jerusalem Mbambi [5.8.2010]. Kahani Waupeta says he learned while still a *pouna*, that is, a boy between ten and fourteen years old [3.8.2010].

Our interlocutors used general terms like *mussana* (the kick), *ngatussana* (to kick) and *koyola* (to drag or pull), but did not employ a formalised system of kick names, as exists in codified martial arts. We observed three main sorts of attack: frontal kicks, circular kicks and sweeps or takedowns.



Figure 3: Angelino Tchimbundo demonstrates sweeping kick on M Cobra Mansa (2011) © by Author & M Cobra Mansa

The most common frontal attack in *engolo* consists in a kick which is somewhere in between a capoeira *meia-lua de frente* and a *chapa*. The circular attacks we²¹ saw are (in capoeira terms) a *meia-lua de frente*, followed by a *queixada*,²² and a kind of *armada*. The latter is made with the upper body more bent (although much less so when the player is standing very near to his opponent). The kicking leg can be kept straight but is also often half-bent (for comparison, in contemporary capoeira this may denote poor style). Furthermore, *engolo* players use a kick very similar to the capoeira *rabo de arraia* (spinning kick with the leg more or less straight); and a kind of hook kick from behind (similar to the capoeira *gancho de costas*). This kick is used when the opponent's upper body

21 The plural ('we') refers to the core research team of the AHRC funded project, The Angolan Roots of Capoeira. See Acknowledgements.

22 A similar double movement has been called 'two from the front' (*duas de frente*) by capoeira masters such as Bimba.

is very close to oneself. As we ourselves experienced during sessions with *engolo* players, this can be a very dangerous kick (as Muhalambadje demonstrates in the film *Body Games. Capoeira and Ancestry* 2014]). Finally they often execute a turn (*giro*) with a kind of *chapa de costa*, with or without jumping. Some players (Patrício) gave the *chapa* from the side, without turning. Some of the most experienced players gave a *martelo* (high strike with the instep) whilst jumping in the air (Kahani).

We observed four kinds of sweep or takedown: first, a lateral sweeping kick similar to the capoeira *banda*, whereby the adversary's foot is lifted into the air and he falls to the ground; second, a *rasteira*, where one positions one's instep behind the heel of the adversary's standing foot and pulls/draws forward to throw him off balance; third, defending against the opponent's *rasteira* (we only saw this in *engolo* lessons, never in a game itself); and finally, a *rasteira* applied to the opponent's knee.²³

Five basic defences against a kick are used in contemporary *engolo*: defending with one hand whilst executing a short jump to put one's body outside of the reach of the kick; an escape where the body is kept upright (Kahani); a dodge under the kick of the opponent, lowering one's head and protecting one's face with one arm; entering into the kick of the adversary with the arm protecting one's face; and escaping the kick with a jump with either one or both arms raised high or also kicking.

A number of further movements were documented by Neves e Sousa, in particular those using the hands on the ground as a basis for kicks (a technique very common in capoeira). We were not able to observe any player using this resource. When asked about kicks that use the hands on the ground, or shown the corresponding image from Neves e Sousa, our interlocutors reacted very differently. In Humbe, *engolo* player Lumbolene categorically denied that *engolo* is or ever was played with the hands on the ground, and judged this type of image from Neves e Sousa not to be *engolo*. Yet *engolo* player Muhalambadje showed us one movement that is very similar to an older form of *rabo de arraia*, as illustrated by Burlamaqui [1928]. A couple of other *engolo* players also commented that hands on the ground were used by very experienced players in the past, but are no longer employed.

3. ENGOLO GAMES AND MUSIC

The men keen to play start clapping hands and humming, which everyone recognises as the way to stimulate others to participate [Mulavela Kahangule, 2.8.2010]. When enough people have joined, one player feels that it is the right moment to start, and intones a song: at least, that was the standard procedure in the performances we saw. Players often enter the *engolo* circle challenging everyone (as in slap boxing). In that case, they jump into the circle, and move around releasing little shouts, until someone else joins them in the circle to play. They can also invite

23 This last movement does not exist in capoeira.

someone in particular, by kicking, or pretending to kick, that man. Yet rather curiously (for a capoeirista), this may result in that person not playing with the challenger, but with someone else. For instance, if A plays with B, A leaves the game and provokes C with a kick, so that C continues to play with B. When a player wants to finish the game, he can just turn his back on his opponent and leave the circle. He may also just raise both arms above his head and leave.

3.1. *Engolo* games

The games in *engolo* are usually very short, to the point that sometimes it seems they haven't taken place at all: it is common for two players to face each other, feinting a couple of kicks and jumping around for some seconds, and then just leave the circle. There are no headbutts, no offensive arm movements and no wrestling techniques; *engolo* players often remain very close to their opponent, seeming almost to adhere to his upper body. Their arms may also touch each other, but they are never a resource for attacks. Throwing is rare, with the exception of an attack similar to a kind of *vingativa* (takedown), where the player enters with one leg behind the opponent's leg(s) and pushes him to the ground with the thorax and one arm (see Figure 3).

Overall, circular movements predominate; the main objective is to hit the opponent's face or upper body with a kick. When confronted with a difficult situation, players often get very close to their opponent, and protect their faces with one arm. It would not be possible to do this in capoeira as there are several attacks to prevent this from happening, such as headbutts, or grappling (in some styles). Takedowns in *engolo* are mainly used as defences.

Overall, *engolo* appears to be a relatively spontaneous game with a minimum of formal ritualisation, at least in recent memory. As we have seen – and in contrast to capoeira – there is no long ritual preliminary to an *engolo* performance, not even to start a game. There are, however, some resources that have no primary martial function but provide the game with embellishments and drama that the audience seems particularly to enjoy. These consist, for example, in lifting the cloths worn around the waist (*pano*) with one hand and showing the buttocks to the opponent and the audience. Players comment on this gesture as being 'good' or 'beautiful' (*otchiwapele*) or as expressing happiness.²⁴

Another common flourish to the game consists in turning around and kicking the air with one leg. This and other movements can be accompanied by short interjections ('Eh!', 'Ih!'). A further gesture we observed in some games, after one player managed to make his opponent fall, was for this player to put his feet on the back of the man lying on the ground.



Figure 4: *Engolo*: Stepping on defeated opponent (Mucupe, 2010) © by Author & M Cobra Mansa

One explanation we heard was that whoever falls cannot move and has to protect his face. We read this as a sign of self-assertion, or even humiliation of the adversary, but that appears to be our interpretation as outsiders. Happiness (*oassuno*) was again the explanation given by experienced players [Mulavela Kanhenguele, 2.8.2010].

Mindful of the difficulty of capoeiristas in agreeing whether their art is to be classified as a sport, a game or a fight, we asked *engolo* players what *engolo* meant to them, (occasionally even asking if it was specifically any of these categories). The most common, and consensual, answer was, 'engolo otchimamo' [for example, Kahani Waupeta, 3.10.2010]. This is best translated as 'game' (according to our translator Tchilulu) but, as we discovered later, can also mean dance, culture, custom. This makes sense in Nhkumbi culture, where *engolo* or dances are seen as being all of these things at the same time. In other words, our initial question did not make much sense to 'engolistas'. Very revealing in this respect is that both the term *okumama* ('to dance') and the term *okussana* ('to kick') are used by *engolo* players. This polysemy of 'engolo' leads us to believe that the term 'game' is therefore as adequate for *engolo* as it is for capoeira.

24 Muhalambadji Moendangola [06.08.2010], Utomba Chindonga [29.08.2011].

3.2. Music and lyrics

The *engolo* game is accompanied by hand clapping, humming and singing. We did not hear of any musical instrument ever being used. (Indeed, older players insisted this had always been so.) Players and audience clap hands and start humming 'ehem'. Then one player takes the lead and intones a verse, to which the audience responds by humming and continuing to clap hands. There is no chorus. When one singer becomes tired, he can signal this by singing 'Help me, I'm tired', and someone else takes over [Mulavela Kahenguele, 2.8.2010]. According to some, 'there are songs for the beginning, and also to finish *engolo*' [Munekavelo Katumbela, 6.8.2010].

Lyrics consist of a short verses; for instance:

It was wickedness! He has already hurt someone.
Who dies in *engolo* is not wept for.

♩ = 160

Clapping: x

Wa - ssan(twa) en - go - lo ka - li - lu - a, eh e eh eh e

Munekavelo Katumbela,
in "Body Games: Capoeira and Ancestry" (2014), Time Code: 01:07:34-01:07:39h

Figure 5: Engolo Song. Transcription by Christine Dettmann

The last line (*Wassanwa engolo kalilwa*) is a central assertion in *engolo*, which every player knows. It refers to the cultural context of the practice: if a player is hurt and dies, he is buried on the spot, and receives no proper funeral. His opponent and his family will not be held responsible for his death, and there is no weeping. This signals that *engolo* held a special, liminal place in Nkhumbi culture, and may also explain why not every man was keen to practise it.

Themes of *engolo* lyrics can vary widely, but they often refer to the everyday life of a herder:

We spent the day with it [*engolo*]. Go help in the corral!
Waiting in the corral of the calves is *engolo*!
[Munekavelo Katumbela, 6.8.2010]

Beyond the herders' routine, other animals and plants are often evoked in proverb-like verses to convey messages that reflect the life experiences of the Nkhumbi:

You can't take milk from the zebra with a *natchongwa* [cattle egret],
The zebra can't be herded [it will go where it wants to go].
[Utomba Chindenga, 29.8.2011]²⁵

'Engolistas' also often use hunting metaphors:

They went around to eat/kill the people
The hunters [people in *engolo*] stayed to cry.
[Muhambadji Moendangolo, 26.8.2011]

²⁵ The egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) lives in symbiosis with the cattle.

Only the broader cultural context can explain the often opaque verses in *engolo*. In the last verse quoted, for example, 'they' refers to the feet in *engolo*, which are able to kill.²⁶

Engolo lyrics seem to consist of a basis of established verses, to which an experienced singer adds new ones, improvising on the spot. Our presence, for example, sometimes provided the material for improvised verses. One wife and mother of an *engolo* player sang some verses also used in other combat games (*khandeka*) or dances (*ovipeluka*, a women's dance) [Nihova Yambalanda, 17.8.2011]. This suggests a certain amount of circularity between various Nkhumbi forms. Thus lyrics – provided one can decipher their meaning – can give core insights into Nkhumbi culture and the meaning of *engolo*.

4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

4.1. Festive occasions for *engolo*

Celebrations provided the occasion to show one's *engolo* skills in a more public, gender-mixed atmosphere. We identified five major festive occasions among the Nkhumbi where *engolo* was likely to happen: the return from the dry-season pastures (*mahata*); the *ongongo* fruit festival; funerals; the girls' puberty ritual (*efiko*); and the male age group celebration (*omakula*).²⁷

Given the almost total lack of rain in the Kunene region outside the period from October to April, Nkhumbi herders would take their flocks away from their villages to distant and ungrazed pastures that might still be green because located near lakes, and into the vast and uninhabited savannah bordering their lands, where animals could survive on the leaves of some types of bush [Estermann 1960: 182–3]. The return from the dry-season pastures (*sambos*) was one of those yearly occasions when plenty of beer (*macau*) made from sorghum (*massambala*) and food was (and still is) consumed.



Figure 6: *Engolo: Drinking macau* (Lombolene Kihapela, 2010) © by Author & M Cobra Mansa

Engolo is also danced when the cattle come back from the forest. Someone orders *macau* to be made, kills his ox, invites the others, and whistles like a herder (*mankhwenya*). ... Because I'm going to call the others to come here, I'm going to kill an ox, because my cattle already came, and my wives made *macau*.
[Jerusalem Mbambi, 5.8.2010]

Neighbours, friends and family were invited and expected to contribute with food or drinks and bring their calabashes as receptacles. Although *engolo* was part of the celebration, men would still assemble outside the homestead to play:

²⁶ For more on the musical cultures of the Nyaneka-Nkhumbi, see Dettmann [2019].

²⁷ Tchitula Pahula, 17.9.2011; Jerusalem Mbambi, 5.8.2010; Domingo Alfredo, 4.8.2010. The male age group celebration recalls, but is different from, the circumcision ritual during early puberty (*ekwendji*).

In my time, when there was a party, or when the cattle came back from the sambo, after drinking a lot of *macau*, the *engolo* started. They go straight to the corral. [Patrício Vilawaliwa, 17.8.2011]

Although the initiation of pubescent boys (*ekwendji*) was a crucially important event for adolescents and their families, *engolo* did not figure prominently in it. This was not only due to the fact that circumcision was one of the central features of *ekwendji*, resulting in boys needing weeks of recovery, but also because few boys would have learned *engolo* at that age.

More important therefore for *engolo* was the *efiko*. This initiation of pubescent girls used to consist in six months of retreat and terminated with several days of festivities where the newly made woman was introduced to neighbours, friends and more distant family members. *Engolo* was played, alongside other traditional forms of celebration (dances, *khankula*). All our interlocutors seemed to agree that it had always been an important occasion for *engolo* to happen:

The *engolo* is only danced at the *macau* for the celebration of the oxen. And at the *efiko* of our daughters. [Mulavela Kahanguele, 20.8.2010]

Adopting Audrey Richards's classic distinction [1982: 52–4], one could assert that the *efiko* also had some aspects of a nubility ritual, insofar as it often provided an occasion for the initiated girls to meet and get engaged to their future husbands. One of our interlocutors, for example, met her late husband during her *efiko* (Nihova Yambalanda, 17.8.2011). No doubt playing *engolo* during *efiko* provided one possibility for young males to show off.

A final important occasion was the funeral of an *engolo* player:

In former times, when an elder (*mais velho*) who also danced *engolo* died, *engolo* could be danced at his funeral. Afterwards they went to sit down at the *tchoto* (homestead fireplace). And there, at the *tchoto*, they start to clap hands to dance the *khankula*. [Mulavela Kahanguele, 2.8.2010]

The *engolo* at the funeral was intended not only to honour the dead, but could also aim to allow the player who had passed away to manifest himself in embodiment by some younger player from his family. This ancestral connection provides evidence that *engolo* was once at the very core of Nkhumbi identity. It also explains why older *engolo* players are so worried about its loss.

4.2. Spirit of the ancestors

A. F. Nogueira, who can be considered the first ethnographer of the Nyaneka and the Nkhumbi, already noted that the latter were 'given to trances (*extases*) and believe in the predictions of the diviners, through the mediation of spirits' [1881: 293]. The missionaries Lang and Tastevin [1937: 145] also related spirit possession among the Nyaneka in their detailed chapter on indigenous beliefs:

It is above all the spirits of former hunters, healers, magicians, dancers or blacksmiths who thus come and help their descendants and communicate the knowledge they had acquired.

Incorporating an ancestral spirit was usually seen by our interlocutors as a necessity to cure an illness:

If you are ill, you attempt to know what the solution is. The very spirit will show himself soon. Someone will appear: 'I'm inside you'. [Kahani Waupeta, 3.8.2010]

Often only the diviner can reveal the identity of the spirit. Paradigmatic is the case of Kahani Waupeta, who told us,

I initiated with the spirit when I was already ill. They said it was my grandfather Mukwya. I did not know him. I was already an *engolo* dancer when the spirit found me. [3.8.2010]

Possession needs to be followed by a ritual initiation (*oktonkheka*). Kahani's *engolo* teacher was also the one who initiated him into the ritual of spirit possession.²⁸ All *engolo* players concurred that the link is usually with someone within the family, who also had played *engolo* and who had developed a particular affection for the descendant he is now possessing. As Muhalambadji Moendangola explains:

The spirit goes to some person, the one he liked most. His nephew, or his son. He goes only there. [6.8.2010]

How does the ancestral spirit impact on the *engolo* game? Munekavelo, for example, not only named the spirit that haunts him, but also mentions him in his *engolo* songs: 'Nahango [son of] Yawabondo'.

When players incorporate a spirit this may not be immediately visible, as they will still play, maybe even better than ordinarily. But the audi-

28 'The one who taught me was a man called Francisco Tchibelembembe, but he already died. He taught me, and also led the ritual through which I was initiated to the spirit' [Kahani Waupeta, 3.8.2010].

ence will notice change in their behaviour, affecting in particular their communication:

My friend, if you see me dancing, you will say, 'What is happening to this old man?' You will pay attention, because you know what my [ordinary] way of dancing is. You only will get scared when I'm crying. You will feel the heat. People can ask me questions, I won't say a word. I will only speak later on. Only like this will I know what the spirit (*omphepo*) is. It's the spirit of the deceased (*yo vaya kalunga*). It's only then that you will discover that my body is not right. If you see me dancing now, you will say, 'Oh! That older one, why is he like that? How did he behave?' [Munekavela Katumbela, 6.8.2010]

Spirit possession adds another, deeper meaning to *engolo*. As we will discuss below, very few cultural practices in the region allow for incorporation of ancestral spirits.

Given the centrality of *engolo* in Humbe culture, how could it have been so consistently overlooked by early ethnographers? Ferreira [1918:401] had no very deep knowledge of Nkhumbi culture, but relied on information from local administrators. Lang and Tastevin [1937], authors of the earliest ethnography of the Nyanekas, explicitly excluded the Nkhumbi and related groups from it. Why Estermann did not mention *engolo* at all is more difficult to establish, as he had been in much longer contact with the Nkhumbi. Living in the region since 1926 and writing at a time when all Kunene peoples had already been subdued, it is understandable that he was much less interested in the martial aspects of their cultures. Thus he also does not mention *kambangula*, although he included a picture of two boys slap boxing. Furthermore, as he was arguing for the amalgamation of the Nyaneka and the Nkhumbi into one single ethnic group, he may have preferred to understate aspects of their cultures that could cast doubt upon his procedure.

4.3. The dynamics of culture and ethnicity

Given the centrality of *engolo* to Nkhumbi culture and society – at least during the twentieth century until the 1970s – one is led to wonder what unites and what separates the various ethnic groups living in the region. What were their markers of identity, and how did societal change affect these? To assess this will help us to discuss the extent to which *engolo*, or some *engolo* predecessor, possibly made the transition to Brazil.

The peoples of south-west Angola clearly share not only many linguistic, but also many cultural features that provide a solid common basis facilitating interaction, intermarriage and eventually the redrawing of ethnic boundaries. Many cultural features are in fact characteristic of Bantu peoples more broadly: for instance, female puberty rituals. Others appear to be quite specific to the peoples of south-west Angola. Thus

the female puberty ritual *efiko* is common to all Nyaneka and Nkhumbi, but shares important features with the practices of neighbouring groups – for example the *efundula* of Ovambo peoples such as the Kwanyama [Estermann 1956–61; Hayes 2006]. At the same time, however, the female puberty ceremony in each of these ethnic groups has specific features, which are recognised as important markers of ethnic identity.

Male circumcision during puberty and the rituals that accompany it constituted another core cultural feature of south-west Angolan societies. As Brochado noted in 1855 [190],

The men from all lands on this side of the Kunene are circumcised; a folly, which they do from time to time, and which only happens when the ruler (*soba*) has sons between the ages of ten and fifteen, who are the owners (*donos*) of the celebrations. This barbarous baptism claims the life of many, the only ones who are buried without being divined by a sorcerer, and also not wept for.

This shows that 'not being wept for' was not a feature unique to *engolo*, but also applied to another core custom entailing the risk of unintended death.

Even though circumcision is still a common practice in south-west Angola today, Kwanyama rulers as early as the mid-nineteenth century abolished the practice, in the process of emancipating themselves from the Humbe kingdom, probably to increase their military power (war and circumcision both took place during the dry period).²⁹

In other words, frequent wars, constant raids and enslavement, colonisation, diseases, droughts and famines had a huge impact on local societies in south-west Angola, which underwent massive changes during and after the end of the transatlantic slave trade. Wars led to entire groups being subjugated or even annihilated. The colonisers, by subjugating the *embala*, the residence of kings and symbol of their might, destroyed or downgraded this highest level of political power or kingship which the Nkhumbi called the *hamba*. The Portuguese only allowed local rulers to remain and adapt to a status as subordinate chiefs (*sovas* and *seculos*). This of course deeply affected the whole society. For example, initiation rituals were no longer centrally coordinated by the king or *hamba*, and were muted into becoming more private, family matters. Estermann's accounts already reflect these changes, even though he still held to his aim of classifying tribes 'objectively' according to racial (Bantu/non Bantu), linguistic and ethnic criteria [1956-57: 13–17; 1983: 30]. Linguistic criteria no doubt played an important role for the Nyaneka and Nkhumbi themselves, considering that the vocabulary

²⁹ Loeb [1962: 236]. Hayes [2006: 7] suggests its abolition may have been associated with military reforms like in the Zulu kingdom under Shaka.

overlap between the various sub-groups could be relatively limited.³⁰

It seems that cultural forms played, and still play, a central role in ethnic differentiation between the peoples now amalgamated into the colonial Nyaneka-Khumbi meta-ethnonym. Nogueira, who resided among both groups in 1851–62, pointed out that the ‘notable difference’ between them was that the Nyaneka celebrated annually the sacred cattle, whereas the Nkhumbi did not [1881: 262–3]. Estermann described six different classes of sacred cattle among the various Nyaneka groups – but without ever mentioning the Nkhumbi, hence implicitly recognising the cultural distance between the two groups. He also compared Nyaneka pastoral poetry with its virtual non-existence among the Nkhumbi, but added that in contrast the Nkhumbi have the *khankula*, where pastoralists ‘dance’ or show in performance the beauty of the cattle they own [1960: 190, 185]. And *khankula* has remained, to this day, another cultural form that functions as a core marker of Nkhumbi identity. Ancestors can dance *khankula* through spirit incorporation, as with *engolo* or playing the musical bow *mbulumbumba*. Possession hence seems to offer direct access to core tenets of Nkhumbi culture specifically, at the same time as some types of possession are part of a broader regional culture of the Angolan south-west and beyond. For example, incorporating an ancestor through playing the *mbulumbumba* is a wider feature, common to other Nyaneka groups. The Mwila for instance make use of the bow; but also of the friction drum (*phuita*) to worship ancestors, a practice of which we have seen no sign among the Khumbi. Hence musical instruments, dances or combat games and their combination in celebrations provide us with a fascinating display of the dialectics of identity and difference in south-west Angola, a picture which is completely at odds with the assumption that *engolo* was a widespread feature of a generic ‘Kunene people’.

What all sources seem to indicate, in contrast, is that only slap boxing and stick fighting were generalised practices in the area, and that this was made possible because they were not associated (as far as is known) with deeper spiritual meanings, nor inserted in ethnically specific rituals. Since slap boxing and stick fighting were so widely practised by boys and young adults in south-western Angola, a question that also needs to be addressed is whether these were taken to Brazil. There is some evidence that slap boxing was practised in Salvador and Rio, and that some of its aspects entered capoeira.³¹ Stick fighting also was part and parcel of combat techniques of enslaved Africans and the lower-classes, and even of nineteenth century capoeira, though one needs to acknowledge that its practice was widespread in Africa and even Europe, too. This of course raises an important issue with regard to the dissemination of *engolo* or its historical predecessor. Did only one ethnic group – the Nkhumbi – practise ‘proto-*engolo*’ at the time of the slave trade? Or did

the practice have cognates in the region, which may have disappeared at a later stage, leaving no trace either in archives or in oral traditions? Before discussing this point, however, it is necessary to describe the core similarities and differences between *engolo* and capoeira. Despite some striking resemblances, capoeira, so the argument goes, is much more than *engolo*.

5. ENGOLO AND CAPOEIRA

5.1. A comparison

The analogy invoked between *engolo* and capoeira since the work of Neves e Sousa is based on the favoured use of feet for attacks in both arts, in particular a circular kick known in capoeira (depending on the style) as *meia-lua de compasso* or *rabo de arraia*, which is rare in other martial arts. And indeed practitioners of *engolo* we interviewed often seemed to concur in the correlation, primarily on account of formal similarities of bodily techniques. Just as capoeira movements are based on the *ginga*, contemporary *engolo* relies on certain basic steps, which provide the framework for the game’s offensive and defensive movements. Yet to us, these jumping steps seemed very different from the swaying *ginga* of capoeira (for the latter, see Lewis [1992: 86–132], Downey [2005], Rosa [2015]). Jumps in *engolo* can be impressive in height, trained by jumping cattle fences for instance. We did not see handstands or cartwheels in contemporary *engolo* (*bananeira* and *aú* in capoeira terms). This also meant that a range of offensive techniques, such as kicking whilst head downwards in *aú*, weren’t used either. However, one of Neves e Sousa’s drawings clearly shows that technique.

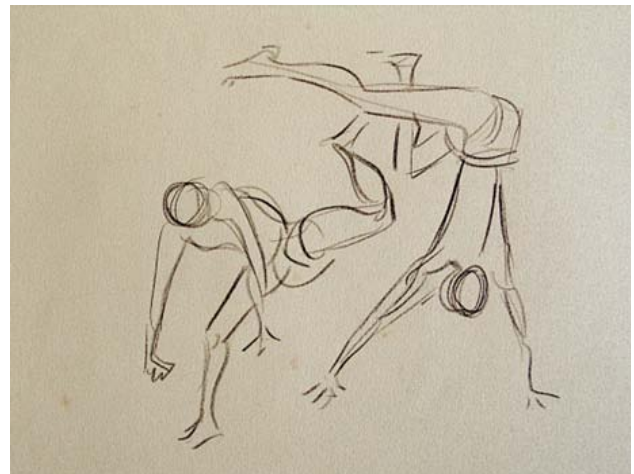


Figure 7: *Engolo*. Drawing by Albano Neves e Sousa, ca. 1955 (by kind permission of Maria Luisa Neves e Sousa)

Opinion among living practitioners was divided. In Humbe (formerly

30 Only 57% between Nyaneka and Nkhumbi according to Anita Pfouts [2003: 26–27, 30].

31 The British consul Wetherall [1860: 119–20] provides a description of slap boxing in the port area of Salvador in the 1850s. In Rio it is remembered as a street fighting technique by capoeira *mestres* such as Mestre Celso (interview, 02/04/2010).

Mutano), the former chief town of the main Nkhumbi polity, where a group of engolistas have occasionally been organising exhibitions before, there seems to be no memory of these movements. One of the group leaders, Lumbolene, explicitly rejected Neves e Sousa's image as not representing engolo.



Figure 8: Discussing Neves e Sousa's images of engolo: Lumbolene Kihapela, Cobra Mansa & Tchilulu Nchongolola, Humbe, 2011. © by Author & M Cobra Mansa

In homesteads in and around Mucope, in contrast, some elderly practitioners confirmed that this technique had been used in the past. At present and without further evidence, one can only speculate about this disparity. Does it reflect difference in local styles or an incipient folklorisation in Humbe, that may have led to a simplification of techniques? Or were practitioners in Mucope keen to establish a maximum of similarities with capoeira acrobatics?

Whatever the answer, it is clear that there were and are significant other differences in bodily techniques between engolo and capoeira. For example, unlike capoeira, there are no headbutts in *engolo*, and no wrestling techniques. Although the latter exist only in some modern capoeira styles, hands were used in older capoeira styles to administer blows (such as the *galopante* in Bimba's Regional style) or as a support for acrobatic movements known as *balões*. It is important to remember, however, that hands were used as the main attack in the slapboxing widely practiced in the whole Southwest of Angola. Furthermore, one variety of *khandeka/kambangula* includes throwing and some wrestling.³² This again suggests that various Angolan combat games may have contributed to the formation of capoeira in Brazil.

32 See the footage from Quiteve in *Body Games, Capoeira and Ancestry* [2014, time code 18:00-19:10].

Another core difference with capoeira is that in engolo, there is (and never seemed to have existed) a game on the ground, with players moving around without getting up, a core technique in particular in Angola-style capoeira. This is hardly surprising given the locations in which engolo was played. Who would have wanted to kneel or put his head on a ground full of dung in the corral?

Nineteenth-century capoeira was also played from a more erect position (as confirmed by the existing iconography) and the ground game was probably only developed later on the flat and stony surfaces of squares and piers in Brazilian port cities. Hence the game on the ground which is so iconic of the Angola style – reputed to be more African – is probably and ironically less African than the exchanges of blows from a standing position, often seen as a Western innovation or 'whitening' of the art supposedly initiated by Mestre Bimba. Hence the emphasis on moving close to the ground may well be the result of what Brazilian traditionalist practitioners perceived as characteristically African during the emergence of the Angola style during the twentieth century.

In summary, the *engolo* game differs significantly from capoeira in character, insofar as 'engolistas' often remain very close to the body of their opponent, seeming almost to adhere to each other's upper bodies. Their arms may also touch, but they are not a resource for attacks as there are no offensive arm movements akin to those employed in capoeira. Indeed, it would be impossible to move in such a way in capoeira, as one would expose oneself to attacks such as headbutts, or (in some styles) grappling. These are just some of the fundamental differences between *engolo* and capoeira movements.

Engolo ritual is also very distinct, despite both games taking place in a circle. For example, in *engolo* a player leaves the game without much protocol, turning his back on the other player. In capoeira, by contrast, one has to take every possible precaution when finishing a game, and never turn one's back towards one's opponent or the centre of the *roda* until one has stepped out of the circle. More generally, it didn't seem to us that engolo had as many rules and rituals as traditional styles such as capoeira Angola and Regional. Furthermore, many aspects of capoeira's 'malícia' – usually translated as cunning or treachery – are absent from engolo. In that sense I would subscribe to the widespread belief among capoeiristas that the experience of enslavement favoured this kind of attitude among the first generations of practitioners.

Other aspects of *engolo* are also strikingly different. The music accompanying *engolo* (humming, singing, handclapping) may share with capoeira music its function of inspiring and moderating the game, but also differs greatly from the latter's orchestra consisting of various instruments, the codified rhythmic patterns used to conduct the performance, the structure of verses or the content of capoeira lyrics. No doubt very different contexts – plantation slavery and post-emancipation – and individual experiences (as reflected in many songs) have shaped the rituals and lyrics of capoeira.

The dissimilarity between *engolo* and capoeira should not come as a surprise given the contrast between the social contexts in which both arts were and are performed, and the disparate cultural meanings they convey. It also is not necessarily a good argument against any ancestral link between both. In fact, as already mentioned, a strong commonality was perceived and voiced by our interlocutors. One could argue that any combat game with kicks would have been seen as related to *engolo*. Yet clearly other aspects played an important role in this. The use of the *berimbau* (which we had brought with us for demonstrations) probably also contributed to this identification of capoeira as something originally Angolan. Various types of musical bows are widely used in the traditional music of the country; in particular the *mbulumbumba* (a laterally played bow with a calabash) among the Nyaneka peoples. The knowledge of the intimate bounds between Angola and Brazil, where the majority of enslaved Angolans were taken to, of course further strengthened the association of capoeira with *engolo* and other combat games such as *kambangula* or *bassula*.

Moreover, during our research in Angola, we were struck by an overall similarity in the way bodily techniques are used in games in both *engolo* and capoeira, best expressed by the capoeira term 'body game' (*jogo de corpo*). As Mestre Cobra Mansa explains:

What I saw in the body game of *engolo* and *kambangula* is that people enjoy that moment. It is not the movement on its own, but it is this smile ... this waiting for [an] opportunity. This is the same spirit you see in capoeira. It was very interesting how Kahani described *engolo*: like the wind hitting a tree ... it has to bend. This is what people have been talking about in capoeira for a long time!³³

Broader comparisons may also be useful here. The overlap of meaning between game, dance and tradition in Nkhumbi culture expressed in the term *ochimama* (see above) echoes in Afro-Brazilian folklore, where many such forms of expression are referred to as '*brincadeiras*' ('games'). This has been seen by scholars as a way of disguising cultural resistance as something more innocuous. Our material from Angola suggests it could be more than that: the ambivalence between game, fight and dance seems more like a kind of ancestral grammar that *engolo* and capoeira share.³⁴ Despite their striking commonalities, however, in the absence of historical descriptions it is hardly tenable to posit direct ancestral links between the two practices – in effect purely on the basis

of formal comparison of two contemporary practices across the Atlantic – unless further evidence can be adduced with regard to the historical presence of the Nkhumbi in Brazil.

5.2. *Nkhumbi in Brazil?*

How many Nkhumbi possibly came as slaves to Brazil (and the Americas in general)? As outlined above, historians have noted that various slave trading routes ran from the Kunene region to the Americas. Yet it seems almost impossible to establish with any precision how many Nyaneka, Nkhumbi or Kwanyama ended up in one of these networks. The great majority of enslaved Africans from the whole region were embarked in Benguela, and for that reason are usually referred to generically as 'Benguelas'. As Mariana Candido [2013: 16, 18] has shown, most of these Benguelas belonged to a variety of groups from the coast and the highlands, many of which were only much later identified as 'Ovimbundu'. At the time of the slave trade, linguistic and cultural affinities between these groups facilitated the emergence of a strong Benguela identity in south-east Brazil, the region of the Americas which absorbed by far the greatest share of them [Brügger and Oliveira 2009: 177–204]. But what can we say about the smaller Angolan identities, in particular from the Kunene region? Marcos Almeida [2012: 124, map 2], in his work on the ethnic denominations of enslaved Africans freed by the Anglo-Brazilian Mixed Commission of 1834–39, locates a small percentage as coming from the Kunene region. Daniel Domingues da Silva has used a broader sample of these lists and combined them with Angolan slave registers for 1854–56. This allowed him to extrapolate numbers for each ethnic group among the enslaved Angolans in the Americas. His estimates are 5,718 for the Nyaneka and 11,880 for the Nkhumbi, the great majority of whom would have gone to Brazil [Dominguez 2017, Appendix A: 174].

Looking at the other side of the Atlantic, Flávio Gomes found more than a dozen enslaved people classified as 'Muhumbe' in lists of runaways in Rio de Janeiro for 1810–30 [Farias, Soares and Gomes 2005: 37, table 3]; and since this is the very name used to this day by Nkhumbi to identify themselves in the singular, there can be little doubt that some of their ancestors indeed toiled under slavery in the city in the first decades of the nineteenth century – precisely the period when capoeira is first documented.³⁵ The numbers involved may be limited, but the link unquestionably exists. Furthermore, it is documented that a small number of enslaved Africans from the Kunene region were taken to the French Antilles, where other combat games using kicks

33 Quotation from the documentary film *Body Games*.

34 To explore this further would require a theoretical discussion for which there is no space here. See for instance Kubik's [1979: 46–50] discussion of 'Angolan traits' in Brazilian music, or the wider literature on African 'retentions' and creolisation.

35 Both Gomes and Brügger and Oliveira [2009] also found records of people classified as 'Mofumbe', a term which seems to be of Central African origins. If 'Mofumbe' can be equated with 'Mohumbe', this would increase the numbers of enslaved Nkhumbi people in Brazil, even if not by a great amount.

became established.³⁶ The late arrival of Nkhumbi in Brazil (not before the end of the eighteenth century) can also help to explain another conundrum: why capoeira only appears in the historical record towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, its very first mention dating back only to 1789 [Cavalcanti 2004: 201–2].

5.3. Conclusions

With respect to putative links between engolo, or any other African combat games, and Brazilian capoeira, the material presented above is admittedly fragmentary. It allows us, however, to formulate two divergent hypotheses regarding the development of capoeira. One possibility is that a number of related Angolan combat games, similar to engolo, were indeed brought to Brazilian port cities and, given their resemblance, merged into a generic capoeira that was still close to its Angolan origins – and hence its characterisation as of Angolan lineage or ‘nation’ at the beginning of the twentieth century. The problem is that there is no ethnographic evidence at all for the existence of any engolo cognates among other ethnic groups in Angola (contrary to the assertion of scholars such as Desch-Obi).

The alternative hypothesis is that a very small number of Nkhumbi herders provided the matrix from which capoeira developed, eventually accommodating other inputs from other enslaved Africans, be it attacks (such as headbutts) or musical instruments (such as the oricongo, which became the berimbau). Could such a small minority of Africans have introduced a cultural practice that was adopted by a much broader community of enslaved people? Such an evolution may not be exceptional. The basis for the Afro-Brazilian religion Tambor de Mina, for example, was provided by ‘Jejes’ (Ewe and Fon peoples) from Dahomey, who represented only 3.5% of all Africans brought to Maranhão; nevertheless ‘Mina’ became the dominant Afro-Brazilian religion in that area [Domingues 2008].³⁷ In other words, the new context of American slavery made possible the spread of formerly ethnic forms among Africans more generally.³⁸ And once capoeira succeeded in becoming a multi-ethnic African practice, the next step – its spread to the free, mostly non-white, underclasses – was enabled. Hence, through its various stages of creolisation, capoeira developed its astounding amenability to adoption by people all around the world. Although at each stage some of the original material was no doubt lost, the fact that even today practitioners of the arts discussed continue immediately to perceive links between them is testimony that they share a common grammar not only of bodily techniques but also at the level of broader cultural meanings. Yet if we are to express the relationship in kinship terms, as

capoeiristas like to do, we should not think of engolo as the ancestor of capoeira, which would be anachronistic. We should rather think of both practices as located within the same generation – as brothers, or as cousins. The distinction depends upon what is emphasised: continuity or rupture, both of which are certainly in evidence. My own preference would be for ‘cousins’, in reflection of a crucial degree of difference between the two practices in terms of cultural meaning.

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Documentary Film

Body Games. Capoeira and Ancestry. Directed by Richard Pakleppa, Matthias Röhrig Assunção and M Cobra Mansa. Portuguese/Olunyaneka, with Portuguese/English subtitles. 87 Mins. UK/South Africa; On Land and Manganga Productions, 2014.

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36 For numbers see maps in Eltis and Richardson [2010]; for martial arts in the Francophone Caribbean see Desch-Obi [2008:122-50].

37 There are many other cases in the Americas: for example, the disproportionate importance of Akan or ‘Coromantee’ culture in Jamaica.

38 Morgan [1997] has advanced the idea of a first ‘charter generation’ to explain the pre-eminence of cultural features from one ethnic group. In our case, however, the group in question was a rather late arrival.

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