

Capoeira - From Ancestor worship and healing to modern sport and holistic therapies.

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Abstract

This article highlights some aspects of the history of capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian martial art, that are relevant for its therapeutic dimensions, such as the role played by ancestor worship in African combat games that may have a common origin. The next section looks at physical and mental benefits of capoeira that are associated with its sportive practice as well as its use in psychoanalytical soma therapy or trauma treatment of children in vulnerable situations. The last part examines how capoeira as holistic practice serves as a support for spiritual development and as a vector of identity construction.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden einige Aspekte der Geschichte der afro-brasilianischen Kampfkunst Capoeira beleuchtet, die für therapeutische Dimensionen von Bedeutung sind, wie etwa die Rolle der Ahnenverehrung in afrikanischen Kampfspielen, die möglicherweise einen gemeinsamen Ursprung haben. Der nächste Abschnitt befasst sich mit den körperlichen und geistigen Vorteilen des Capoeira, die mit seiner sportlichen Ausübung verbunden sind, sowie mit seiner Verwendung in der psychoanalytischen Somatherapie oder der Traumabehandlung von Kindern in gefährdeten Situationen. Im letzten Teil wird untersucht, wie Capoeira als ganzheitliche Praxis zur Unterstützung der spirituellen Entwicklung und als Identitätskonstruktion dienen kann.

1 INTRODUCTION

Looking at the historical trajectory of capoeira throughout the 20th century, we can say that this martial art, whose origins go back to the cultural practices of enslaved people in colonial Brazil, points to a continuous involvement with the area of health. Since capoeira established itself as a sport, its potential as a gymnastic system aimed at promoting health has been highlighted and praised. While at first this was done from a hygienist perspective, and from a pragmatic and segmented approach to health, gradually therapeutic qualities related to more holistic views began to emerge, highlighting aspects such as fluidity, motoric capacities and its integration with musicality and spirituality. During the process of institutionalisation of capoeira, which started in the second half of the 20th century, scientific research focussing on the relationship between capoeira and health has also grown considerably.

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This process, however, was not linear. In fact, just like the very dynamics of capoeira's institutionalisation (social acceptance as a practice by specific groups and subsequent 'appropriations' by other sectors of society, with various objectives), the explicit focus on issues of health and well-being reveals various aspects of Brazil's own historical dynamics and of a transnational context. Those are the developments that, in very general terms, we aim to describe in this article.

Martial arts have always been deeply linked to a philosophy of life that goes beyond simple sporting practice or self-defence. In many Eastern traditions, they are understood as a path to physical, mental and spiritual balance, promoting discipline, self-control and harmony with the environment. This holistic view of health has made martial arts not only an instrument of defence, but also a tool for self-knowledge and personal improvement.

Throughout their incorporation into sporting practices in the West, these characteristics have always been emphasised, reinforcing the idea that martial arts are not just about combat techniques. Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Judo was developed by Jigoro Kano based on some traditional fighting techniques (*bujutsu*) and came to be recognised as an educational practice, the West began to see these fighting systems as something deeper, based on ethical and philosophical values. The *bushido* code itself, which governed the behaviour of samurai in feudal Japan, influenced the perception of martial arts as disciplines that teach courage, humility and respect, reinforcing their cultural and moral character leading to the elaboration of *budo*.

In this way, martial arts have always been surrounded by an aura that goes beyond mere physical activity, often being treated with a certain mysticism. In cinema and literature, for example, the figure of the wise master and the search for inner perfection are recurring themes, which reflects this historical and cultural perception. In addition, practices such as tai chi chuan, traditionally aimed at balancing the body's energy, have been incorporated into modern therapeutic programmes, proving their value in promoting health and well-being. Over time, therefore, many martial arts have maintained their philosophical core, being valued not only for their physical enhancement, but also for their contribution to mental and spiritual health.

Like the oriental martial arts, capoeira has travelled a path that goes beyond simple bodily practice, preserving or acquiring broader and deeper meanings throughout its history. It's no coincidence that the first systematisations that capoeira underwent in Brazil coincided (or almost coincided) with movements in the East to transform traditional martial arts into safer forms, with pedagogical foundations for their dissemination among young people in schools, sports clubs and universities. The turn from the 19th to the 20th century represented a major moment in the expansion of fighting sports, in the broadest sense, on a global scale, which is precisely the context in which capoeira was first sportified.

Originating in the context of African cultures, capoeira developed in Brazil as a form of resistance for enslaved peoples, blending fighting, dance, music and spirituality into a unique system of bodily techniques¹. Just as kung fu, judo and other oriental martial arts carry principles of balance and

¹Capoeira “[...] relies primarily on striking techniques, although some grappling manoeuvres, especially takedowns utilizing the legs in either tripping or scissoring motions, and weapon techniques complete the repertoire of the capoeirista (practitioner or “player” of capoeira). Various etymologies of the name capoeira are offered in the scholarly literature. [...] Neither these nor any of a multitude of other explanations for the origin of the term have been universally accepted” (Green, 2001: 61). In fact, grappling is only allowed in some styles and its admittance has been the object of some controversy, since capoeira with unlimited grappling can easily slide into “capojitsu” and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).

harmony, capoeira is a practice that transcends mere combat technique, incorporating a strong mystical component and a peculiar ethic of the *malandro* (rogue).

Throughout this article, historical aspects of capoeira will be presented, analysing the multiple connections between its practice and its potential as promoting health and well-being. To this end, we distinguish between spirituality and healing in holistic approaches throughout history and more measurable physical benefits in sportive styles as shown in a range of more recent investigations. In this way, we seek to deepen our understanding of multiple ways capoeira can be considered beneficial to health and is able to address mental and physical issues, as well as building collective well-being.

2 THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CAPOEIRA

Capoeira is documented since the early nineteenth century in Rio de Janeiro, and in some other Brazilian port cities some decades later. Enslaved Africans and Creoles (Brazilian-born blacks) practiced a combat game with kicks and head butts which colonial authorities judged dangerous and started to repress harshly. In Rio, “capoeiras”, as they were then known, were to be punished by 300 lashes of the whip and imprisoned. Nonetheless capoeira continued to be practiced, with or without weapons, with or without music².

The earliest instrument associated with capoeira is a small drum, represented in the iconic engraving based on drawings by Johann Moritz Rugendas and first published in 1835. The musical bow called *berimbau*, although very present in the streets and plantations of Brazil, only became associated with capoeira in Bahia, probably around the end of the nineteenth century³. The social context and the cultural background of capoeira point towards its African origins, and similar combat games developed in the French Caribbean and the plantation island of Réunion, reinforcing the idea of a diasporic link. It is very difficult, however, to establish precise genealogies, as very little is known about combat games in Africa during the time of the transatlantic slave trade, which lasted from the 16th to the 19th century and deported about 14 million Africans to colonies in the Americas. Combat games using similar techniques have been documented for more recent periods in West Africa (notably Ghana and Nigeria), Angola and Madagascar.

Given the harsh repression of its practice during the nineteenth century, capoeira practitioners chose more discreet locations such as backyards or hills to train. In Rio de Janeiro, in particular, they associated in gangs to be able to better oppose police repression. These so-called *maltsas* developed their own sub-culture and by the mid nineteenth century a dozen or so of these had established their territories in the city of Rio de Janeiro, usually based around a parish church, confronting police or rival gangs in fierce battles that often left many wounded or dead.

Free men of colour and poor whites also entered these gangs, which ended up in two overarching federations, Nagoas and Guaiamus, which allied with politicians to help them rig elections and enjoy a certain level of protection. Capoeiras hence came to be seen as integral part of an increasingly corrupt regime of the Brazilian Empire (1822-89). The Republic regime therefore immediately implemented a harsh repression in Rio de Janeiro out of fear of monarchist counterrevolution (Soares 1994). Hundreds of capoeiras were deported in the early months of 1890. The prohibition of capoeira and gangs was enshrined in the new criminal code.

²For a detailed account of this “slave capoeira”, see Soares (2001).

³For the various conflicting narratives about the origins of capoeira, see Assunção (2005, chap. 1).

A number of intellectuals advocated the redemption of capoeira techniques and the adoption of a hygienised form as a Brazilian national gymnastic. The first decades of the twentieth century, whilst street capoeira still was officially forbidden, also saw the first attempts to develop a modernised form of capoeira, in line with the creation of national gymnastics or a national sport in other countries. For them, capoeira was a typical expression of Brazilianness, which they also associated with the people of mixed black/white ancestry, the mulattoes. In Salvador, where capoeira had resisted repression better because of its insertion into Afro-Bahian popular culture, Manoel dos Reis Machado (better known as Mestre Bimba) created the new “Regional” style, which succeeded in increasing fighting efficiency whilst maintaining many of capoeira’s African derived foundations, from rituals to spirituality, hence laying the ground for capoeira’s subsequent growth and development⁴. The nationalist narrative and the necessity to modernise was not only challenged by anthropologists and folklorists since the 1930s, but also by a group of capoeira masters who refused to transform their art into mere sport activity. Claiming the Angolan ancestry of capoeira, they called their traditionalist style capoeira Angola (Assunção, 2005, chap. 3 & 5)⁵.

The re-democratisation of Brazil in the 1980s, the centenary of the Abolition of Slavery in 1988, and the growth of the Black Consciousness Movement allowed for this Afrocentric narrative – capoeira as a fundamentally African derived art form – to gain significant strength in Brazil and abroad. We can therefore say that capoeira, through its history, although experimenting significant change in form and contents, remained an alternative practice to conventional sport and mainstream, hegemonic white or European-derived culture.

3 ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND HEALING

Martial skills in African societies included military training, combat games and war dances. Invoking the protection of Gods, conducting rituals and elaborating charms to protect fighters or inhibit their opponents were core to African warfare. Not much is known about martial arts in precolonial West Africa and West Central Africa, the main regions from where the enslaved coming to the Americas were abducted. The limited source material however leaves no doubt that music was central to training and performance (Assunção 2024). No doubt this association favoured the therapeutic aspects of martial art practice. Training to rhythmic music helped to relax the body whilst also improving performance.

Beyond this intrinsic relationship, African martial arts often also involved deeper spiritual connections and healing practices. This is clear from the case of *engolo*, a martial art practiced by pastoralists from the Nkhumbi ethnic group in Southwest Angola until the 1970s (which is being revived today). Whilst younger boys and adolescents train slap boxing and stick fighting, as part of their induction to herding cattle, *engolo* was rather reserved for males that had gone through ritual circumcision, the initiation into adulthood (*ekwendje*). *Engolo* was practised as on a day-to-day basis in the corral or on river beaches; and it certainly contributed in significant ways to the fitness of pastoralists. But it was also part of major celebrations such as the return of the cattle from the pastures at the end of the dry season or the *efiko*, the initiation of young girls.

Engolo is played in a circle, where two players are surrounded by others who clap hands and sing songs that are specific to this art form. The players execute a characteristic basic jump to the rhythm of the song and exchange kicks (no punches or head butting is allowed). Some players can

⁴There is a vast literature on Mestre Bimba and his Regional style. See Vieira (1995).

⁵For anthropological studies of capoeira Angola, see Downey (1998) and González Varela (2017).

incorporate a spirit of an ancestor during play, which may affect the way they play. According to the practitioners we interviewed, this is usually someone from the family (an uncle or grandfather) who very much liked engolo himself. Hence the practitioner connects to the world of spirits, and more specifically his own ancestors through the game. This incorporation can happen spontaneously or after falling ill and consulting a religious specialist, a *kimbanda*. In the case of unexplainable illness, the *kimbanda* will point towards the need to honour the ancestor by playing and will help and prepare the novice to deal with this spiritual relationship. (Desch-Obi 2008, chap. 1, Assunção 2023)

Music, usually focused on drums, is core to inducing incorporation in many religions, in particular in African and African derived religions as exist in Brazil and the Caribbean. In Southwest Angola, some other instruments are also known to induce trance as a means of ancestor worship: the friction drum *phuita* and the musical bows *mbulumbumba* and *ekondji*. Hence incorporation in engolo was part of a wider cultural and religious practice. The hypnotic rhythms and sounds of these instruments stimulate altered states of mind and trance.

In Brazil friction drums and musical bows related to their Angolan matrix were and are still used. A friction drum (*phuita*) was formerly used in the *jongo* dance of the Paraiba valley in Southeast Brazil; a similar instrument (*tambor onça*) is used in *bumba-meu-boi* in Maranhão state. A musical bow with a gourd (today known as *berimbau*) was incorporated into capoeira in Bahia, a region with strong Afro-Brazilian traditions. Many capoeira practitioners born between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, were associated to Candomblé shrines, assuming a variety of functions⁶. The musical bow was even used in some of its religious ceremonies, and there are historical recordings from the 1940s of capoeira masters playing sacred Candomblé music on their *berimbau*⁷. The links between capoeira, its instruments and the Afro-Bahian sacred are thus multiple. The rhythmic and harmonic structure of capoeira music is also closely related to the music of other Afro-Bahian forms such as *samba-de-roda* as well as to Candomblé⁸.

The very atmosphere of a capoeira game in the classic Bahian period of the first half of the twentieth century very much resembled celebrations in Candomblé, as Edison Carneiro (1937: 150, 155) and Cláudio Tavares (1948:14) observed. The initial kneeling of the two players at the foot of the *berimbau* and the singing of a “litany” (*ladainha*) is the preliminary prayer to open the space of the circle (*roda*) and start a game⁹. Games usually start slowly and can then evolve into increasingly

⁶Capoeira traditions highlight the belief in the ability to use supernormal powers. “In addition to the creation of the *corpo fechado* (Portuguese; closed body) that is impervious to knives or bullets, oral tradition attests to the ability of some capoeiristas to transform into an animal or tree, or even to disappear at will” (Green, 2001: 133).

⁷“In capoeira, the *roda*, the circle of play formed by capoeiristas awaiting their opportunities to enter, is essentially created by the *berimbau* (the musical instrument used to accompany the *jogo* – the martial contest of the art). The position in the *roda* occupied by the *berimbau* and by the *mestre* (teacher) constitutes a high-intensity area analogous to those noted in the Japanese *dôjô*. The *pe do berimbau* (foot of the *berimbau*) denotes the opening (the door, as conceived in this tradition) through which one must enter to play. This door should be approached in a crouch from the outside of the ring. To enter, players kneel, perform ritual gestures (perhaps making the sign of the cross familiar in Roman Catholicism), and enter the *roda* with an acrobatic flourish (e.g., a cartwheel) before beginning the *jogo*. The phenomenon of creating a sacred space without resorting to physical structures suggests that the training areas of traditional martial arts are more properly regarded as conceptual rather than physical” (Green, 2001: 646).

⁸For an examination of that relationship, see Tiago Oliveira Pinto (1991).

⁹“Capoeira is said to be ‘played’; therefore, a match is labeled a *jogo* (a game). The *jogo* takes place in a ring called a *roda* (wheel) formed by participants waiting their turns to play. *Roda* is also the label used for an occasion for capoeira play, for example, ‘next Sunday’s *roda*.’ The *jogo* is played to the musical accompaniment of percussion instruments derived in the New World from African archetypes: the *berimbau* (a large musical bow utilizing a gourd resonator that is played by striking its metal bowstring with a stick), the *pandeiro* (tambourine), the *agôgô* (a pair of clapperless bells struck with a metal stick), the *reco-reco* (a notched scraper), and the *atabaque* (conga drum).

rapid motions. So, there are important parallels in structure here, even if capoeiristas will never lose consciousness and enter in a similar trance when playing a game. However, an excellent game will produce wider effects than the pure adrenaline push common to all bodily exercises and sportive activities.

Capoeiristas often summarise this mystical-bodily experience in the game-fight in the word *mandinga*. More than a simple technical and tactical sophistication demonstrated in the game, *mandinga* can be described as the expression of a set of qualities that, in addition to the game, involve sensitivity and keen perception, allowing readings that anticipate the opponent's movements, as well as the ability to deceive in the course of the game-fight. For some, *mandinga* is even more spiritually positioned, forming a strong connection with the sacred, from which protection is sought before each game.

Music plays an essential role in this experience, functioning not just as an accompanying element, but as a force that guides the flow of the *roda* and enhances the collective and individual experience. In this context, the chants and musical instruments, especially the *atabaques* – which are present both in African religions such as *candomblé* and in *capoeira* – establish a bridge with the transcendent dimension, reinforcing the idea that *capoeira* is also a practice of spiritual connection and strengthening of cultural identity¹⁰. justification to promote its sportive and hygienised practice. Various high-ranking officers promoted *capoeira* training within the military forces (Navy, Army and Military Police). The Brazilian Airforce promoted the first nationwide *capoeira* encounters in 1968 and 1969 which kicked off a nationwide reflection about the art.

The *capoeira* practitioner and medical doctor Angelo Decanio (2002) was among the first to reflect about what he called the “*capoeira* trance”. He stressed that it was different from spirit possession in *Candomblé*, as it does not entail such a significant loss of consciousness, but that nevertheless “[...] its practitioner reaches a modified state of consciousness in which the BEING behaves as an integral part of the harmonious whole in which he is inserted at that moment.” (Decanio, 2002:5). For Decânio, this modified state of consciousness not only allows the *capoeira* game to better flow, but helps the learning process under the direction of a qualified *capoeira* master: “During the *capoeira* trance, the *capoeirista* modifies his emotional state and starts to face as pleasurable a situation of imaginary risk under the protection of the ritual and the supervision and responsibility of the *Mestre*, in order to facilitate the learning and recording of adequate solutions ‘the supposed situations of danger’ [...]” (Decanio, 2002:5)

Even with *capoeira*'s sporting development throughout the 20th century and its expansion around the world, this strong link to spirituality has never disappeared. On the contrary, it remains an essential element for many *mestres* and practitioners, who see *capoeira* as a means not only of developing physical skills, but also of cultivating values such as respect, strategy and self-knowledge. Just as Eastern martial arts have been incorporated into the West by preserving elements of their philosophy, *capoeira* practitioners, in their global journey, have endeavoured to maintain their roots

The *berimbau* is the primary instrument and is venerated by players. For example, its placement provides spatial orientation for play, in that its location is called *pé do berimbau* (foot of the *berimbau*), and players enter the *roda* after kneeling facing one another and performing a private ritual (e.g., making the sign of the cross) in front of the *berimbau*. Thus, the instrument creates a ‘sacred space’ in the *roda*” (Green, 2001: 63).

¹⁰“Songs involving a leader-and response pattern are sung during play. The words of these songs embody, to take a few examples, comments on *capoeira* in general, insults directed toward various types of styles of play or types of players, and biographical allusions to famous *capoeiristas*. The sense of *capoeira* as a dance is established by this musical frame for the action and completed by the movements taking place within the *roda*” (in: Green, 2001: 64).

and their connection to ancestry, preserving its mystical and cultural character as one of the pillars of their practice. In that sense, capoeira, especially in its more traditionalist styles, can be seen as a therapeutic exercise of the body and the mind.

4 CAPOEIRA AS A MODERN SPORT THERAPY AND PATH TO WELLBEING.

As mentioned, since the early 19th century Brazilian military officers and intellectuals claimed that capoeira had the potential to become the national sport of Brazil. When a sportive version of capoeira was developed decades later and became the mainstream of contemporary styles (to the point of being called “contemporary capoeira”), these supposed physical benefits of capoeira were always used as justification to promote its sportive and hygienised practice. Various high-ranking officers promoted capoeira training within the military forces (Navy, Army and Military Police). The Brazilian Airforce promoted the first nationwide capoeira encounters in 1968 and 1969 which kicked off a nationwide reflection about the art.

More recently, the scientific community has taken an interest in systematically investigating the impact of capoeira on health. Academic studies point to evidence that this martial art can be an effective tool for promoting physical and psychological health. A study published in the *Journal of the Brazilian Medical Association* evaluated 245 capoeira practitioners and found evidence that the sport contributes to health rehabilitation, improving biological variables such as body composition, metabolism and cardiorespiratory capacity (Moreira, Oliveira, Ariel & Armstrong, 2022). In addition, the capoeiristas in the study had higher quality of life indices compared to the general population and practitioners of other martial arts, especially in the psychological domain. Capoeira can also contribute to develop a range of skills in children with Down syndrome (Araújo & Kohl, 2016).

All these studies suggest that capoeira promotes not only physical fitness, but also emotional and social aspects of well-being.

In a context of adversity, its positive effects are also notable: even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the capoeiristas studied maintained a quality of life equal to or higher than that observed before the pandemic, indicating a possible protective role of capoeira’s physical and community activity in times of collective stress. Capoeira has been increasingly practised around the world as a form of physical exercise and healthy leisure activity. Among its main attractions is the fact that its movements require motor coordination, strength, endurance, flexibility, power and agility. This combination of demands makes capoeira a complete exercise, working multiple muscle groups and body systems. Studies indicate, for example, that long-term capoeiristas show an improvement in health indicators, such as a reduction in the percentage of fat, an increase in bone and muscle mass, an improvement in metabolism (with lower levels of triglycerides and glycaemia) and greater cardiovascular efficiency. Regular practice helps develop cardiorespiratory fitness, balance and quick reflexes, as well as contributing to weight control and improving body composition (reducing fat and increasing muscle mass).

In addition to its physical benefits, capoeira is known for favouring mental and emotional well-being. As a pleasurable activity accompanied by music, it acts as a stress reliever: during the game, the body releases endorphins and other neurotransmitters that improve mood and reduce tension.

The concentration required by the movements and the interaction with the partner also provides a state in which the practitioner is totally present, temporarily taking their mind off everyday worries. Another important aspect is increased self-confidence and discipline. As students learn

to overcome physical challenges (such as executing a difficult move) and social challenges (such as playing with more experienced partners), they develop self-confidence and persistence.

The strong sense of community present in capoeira groups also contributes to psychological well-being. Capoeira collectives often define themselves as 'families' united by common goals and mutual respect and co-operation. These socio-psychological factors help to reduce anxiety, improve self-esteem and promote a personal balance between body and mind. That may be the reason why capoeira has also been used to treat drug addiction (Alvesa et al., 2024).

One important development to mention in this context is the use of capoeira Angola in Soma therapy. Soma therapy, or Soma, is a therapeutic method developed in Brazil during the late 1960s, early 1970s by the medical doctor and psychiatrist Roberto Freire (1927-2008). Freire was very influenced by the work of Wilhelm Reich and combined his bioenergetic approach with Gestalt theory and an anarchist worldview. For Freire, one of the best body-centred ways to develop individual autonomy through group dynamics was to practice capoeira Angola. Hence capoeira Angola he definitively incorporated into Soma therapy in the 1980s and therapists who didn't agree with that left the group (Mata, 2001: 92).

Therapy is practiced by groups of 15 – 20 people from 12 to 18 months. Every month there are four therapy sessions, with a duration of three hours, half of which consists of physical exercises, including capoeira Angola. At the end, participants reflect about the exercises (Mata, 2001:59). Capoeira Angola is seen by Soma therapists as an "orgasmic equivalent" and powerful transforming agent that can deal with the neurosis in the body. When patients don't want to practice capoeira this is interpreted as a resistance to therapy. For Soma adepts, capoeira Angola allows creativity to flow and patients to develop their own corporal language (Mata, 2001: 63-67). Mainstream capoeira styles, in contrast, are seen as perpetuating authoritarian pedagogy. Patients which had practiced capoeira before entering Soma therefore leading to issues within therapeutic groups. Until today Soma therapists in Brazil and abroad, many of them organised in the collective *Brancaleone*, teach capoeira Angola as an essential part of their therapeutic work (Mata, 2015)¹¹.

A very promising initiative in this area is the project "Gingando Pela Paz" ("Ginga for Peace", or GPP). GPP started to work with children in Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns in 2005. The idea is to provide psychosocial support for children in situations of vulnerability through capoeira. Since 2008 GPP carries out a project in Port-au-Prince (Haiti) that has involved more than 2,000 children, many of which were being used by gangs in armed conflicts. From 2014 to 2018 GPP carried out the programme "Capoeira pour la paix", which involved 9,600 children (including 1,700 girls) that in Goma (Congo DRC). GPP has continued to work in these locations ever since. Capoeira is used as a tool to reduce traumatism, and increase resilience to violence, promote a culture of peace among its networks. The idea is that each child becomes a protagonist in its own transformation. (Saudade, 2024)¹².

Although the studies on the relationship between capoeira and health are still relatively recent, the findings so far reinforce the perception that this traditional practice can contribute significantly to the promotion of integral health – encompassing body, mind and its social and communal dimensions.

¹¹Also consult the website <https://www.somaterapia.com.br/en/> (accessed 17.03.2025). Roberto Freire conducted a famous interview with Master Vicente Pastinha, the doyen of capoeira Angola in the 1960s.

¹²For more information, consult the GPP website: <https://gingandopelapaz.org>

5 CAPOEIRA AS MODERN HOLISTIC PRACTICE AND VECTOR OF IDENTITY

IN the field of martial arts, the identification of the sacred as part of their cultural matrix is well known. Martial arts have always sought to define themselves as a set of practices and conceptions that go far beyond a sporting category or a set of defence and attack techniques. In this way, it can be said that, in general, the trajectory of the cultural modernisation and expansion of martial arts throughout the Western world and beyond reveals this intrinsic tension: the dynamics of their sportification and transformation into an object of consumption in the logic of the culture industry versus the constant effort of many of their masters to preserve their roots and their links with the ethical and philosophical aspects of such practices.

Research into the history of martial arts has increasingly shown that, around the world, these cultural practices have links to an interpretation of the world and social life characterised by the search for balance, which includes the search for physical and mental health.

Bearing in mind the specificities of each local cultural tradition, it can be said that these observations are valid for the martial arts of the Indian subcontinent, but also in general for Eastern martial arts as a whole. It is the process of urbanisation and the segmentation of life into distinct moments (work-sport-leisure-religion), typical of Western modernity, that tends to distance martial arts from their original conception of seeking the integral balance of the human being, and therefore of health.

However, in recent decades, there has been an intense movement to recover this holistic dimension, in which martial arts have now re-emerged as genuine therapeutic alternatives. Capoeira, which is part of the global martial arts movement, is included in this process. Capoeira started to be practiced outside Brazil in the 1970s, but only emerged massively on the global scene during the 1990s. Today a variety of styles are practiced in Brazil and in 150 countries around the world. Each of them entails different approaches towards health, therapy and ancestry.

Although capoeira was integrated into the process of sportification, with standardised rules and official competitions, its ancestral character and the appreciation of spirituality as essential parts of this art form have been intensely revived since the 1990s in other styles. This movement to return to the roots is not limited to a mystical quest, but is also deeply related to the cultural resistance and political struggles of black people in Brazil, a historically marginalised group.

The revival of spirituality in capoeira is part of its re-reading as an identity discourse, strengthening the connection with Afro-Brazilian traditions and reaffirming its role in the construction of a collective memory of struggle and belonging. In addition, this revival broadens the understanding of capoeira as a practice that transcends sport and physical performance, opening up a universe of possibilities for its application as a tool for social empowerment, cultural expression and the promotion of physical and emotional well-being.

This closeness of capoeira with Afro-Brazilian traditions of spirit possession and healing no doubt means that some of this is also in present-day capoeira, especially in traditionalist styles. The ancestral link with Africa is often invoked by these capoeira practitioners.

A central concept is *axé*, a term of Yoruba origin from the Afro-Brazilian candomblé religion that denotes spiritual and vital energy as well as the power to fulfil. According to Moniz Sodré (1988:129), *axé* is 'vital force, without which, according to the Nagô worldview, beings could have neither existence nor transformation'. The spiritual energy and positive vibration created and shared between the participants during a capoeira game corresponds to *axé*.

Capoeiristas today frequently talk about *axé*. They often use it to greet each other, wishing "Axé!". They believe that a game is only fulfilling when there is this collective energy and respect between the participants, a powerful and pleasant flow. There are also religious influences, although there is rarely a direct link with religious institutions and specific liturgies. Many traditional songs make references to Catholic saints. Because of the religious syncretism present in Afro-Brazilian culture, these saints can and often do also indirectly evoke Afro-Brazilian deities and ancestor spirits. In more recent times, many capoeira songs directly invoke these entities, such as *orixás*, *voduns*, *inquices*, *pretos velhos* and *caboclos*.

This spiritual dimension of capoeira, despite its fluidity and lack of systemic character, hence promotes a sense of community and connection between body and mind, transforming the capoeira circle (*roda*) into a collective ritual of communication, co-operation and the exchange of positive energies.

This potential has also drawn attention from the opposite side of the religious spectrum. Neopentecostalism is on the rise in Brazil, with 27 per cent of the population following evangelical congregations of various kinds. No wonder then that Pentecostal churches have sponsored their own modality, known as "Christ's capoeira" or "capoeira gospel". Capoeira gospel takes great care to eliminate all references to Afro-Brazilian religions, considered to embody the devil¹³ Hence in one famous capoeira song, for example, it's no longer Iemanjá, the Yoruba goddess of the sea, which prevents the boat from turning over, but Jesus Christ.

Afrocentric mestres and groups, in contrast, are trying to rather explore in more depth the philosophical dimension and the spiritual roots of capoeira in Africa. Even though capoeira is difficult to trace to one unique origin, various aspects point toward a predominant West Central African cultural background from where the majority of enslaved peoples came in Brazil. People in that area spoke various kinds of Bantu languages, such as Bakongo, Kimbundo or Ovimbundo, among others. The study of the religion and philosophy of the Bakongo by specialists, in particular, has resulted in a sizeable historiography and international exchanges and conversations. Capoeira is seen by many as one prominent, global expression of this culture. For that reason, a movement led by Master Cobra Mansa and the Quilombo Tenondé in Bahia combines the study and experience of the "Bakongo Cosmogramme" with capoeira training in their workshop¹⁴. This incorporation of capoeira in various religious or spiritual movements has again great therapeutic relevance which goes well beyond the benefits of a sporting exercise.

6 CONCLUSION

THE amazing growth of capoeira over the last three or four decades, in Brazil and abroad, has also led to the emergence of widely different styles, based on contrasting worldviews, ethics, practices and organisations. Capoeira Angola has become the rallying cry for practitioners interested in the

¹³See Schreiber (2017).

¹⁴For more details of the epistemological, historical and capoeira background of this quest, see Peçanha (2017).

art's African roots, its cultural meaning and a communal, non-antagonistic practice (at least in its ambitions). On the other side, a more antagonistic capoeira is more interested in martial effectivity, and how capoeira techniques may enhance people's Mixed Martial Arts practice. And finally, a mainstream "contemporary capoeira" (capoeira contemporânea), which is more orientated towards sportive practice.

In all of these styles though, musicality, rhythm, movement and communality can act in a beneficial way on physical and mental balance. All of them equally value capoeira as cultural heritage and bodily expression that leads to the physical, emotional and social development of its practitioners. Sportive styles promote capoeira as a tool towards a healthy life, whereas other schools, in particular traditionalist groups, emphasise more spirituality. What cultural heritage, spirituality, and capoeira's identity consists in is itself object of disputes between Afrocentric, Brazilian nationalist and other narratives. Moreover, the growth and institutionalisation of capoeira resulted in significant tensions between the capoeira masters formed through traditional method (learning everything from an older master) and the capoeira teachers who took a degree in physical education in a Brazilian faculty. This is shown by the impossibility of capoeira masters and teachers in Brazil reaching a consensus about the regulation of the profession. Attempts to require formal diploma for teaching capoeira for example in schools fuel the already fierce competition on the labour market, resulting in increased difficulties for traditional masters.

Furthermore, recent developments in the last twenty years or so have led to the emergence of new discourses and new interpretations of the sacred and the mystical aspect discussed above. On one side a new type of capoeira, auto-entitled "capoeira gospel" tries to eradicate markers of African identity and spirituality from the practice, to fit the requirements and religious intolerance of Brazilian Pentecostal churches. On the other, the search for African roots has let some Angola groups to build bridges to broader spirituality, in particular the promotion of a "Bakongo Cosmogramme" through which practitioners supposedly can link back to the cultural matrix of capoeira (Rosa, 2022).

Capoeira, as a martial art and cultural expression, illustrates the link between bodily practice and health promotion in an exemplary way. Its history reveals how fighting is often associated with dance, ritual and heritage, carrying values of freedom, spirituality and communion. Today, whether in urban gyms or community projects, the capoeira circle continues to offer a space for strengthening the body and developing motor skills increasing physical well-being as well as mental well-being (reducing stress, boosting confidence and creating social bonds) and strengthening community life.

In addition to its acrobatic moves, headbutts and kicks, capoeira offers practitioners a philosophy of balance: it teaches them to fall and get up with a sense of equilibrium, to face challenges creatively and to respect their peers. Thus, the relationship between capoeira and health goes far beyond physical conditioning, reaching the emotional and spiritual dimension of the human being. As part of the legacy of martial arts around the world, capoeira contributes to personal and collective balance, reaffirming that culture, sport and health can be part of the same communal project of building a healthier and fuller life for everyone.

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Videos

Activities of the Social Capoeira training center in Goma, DRC, in 2024;
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