Capoeira

The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art

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Introduction

Hail! Hail the nation
Hail the Brazilian nation
Hail Princessa Isabel, oh my God,
Who delivered me from captivity!

(M.Canjiquinha[1])

Lady Isabel, what story is this
That you made abolition?
That you are the nice princess
That finished with slavery?
I am tired of that idle chat
I am tired of that illusion

(M.Toni Vargas[2])

In most European and US cities one can see young people from different ethnic backgrounds and genders carrying around a musical bow, or *berimbau*. Twenty years ago this would have inevitably raised questions over the purpose of that strange device, but today many people recognize it as the basic musical instrument of capoeira. The use of an entire percussion orchestra shows that capoeira involves much more than mere physical exercise. Practitioners—typically between 16 and 35 years old—not only execute awkward movements to the rhythm of the orchestra, but also need to play these instruments, and to sing in Portuguese. Yet capoeira is much more than music and dance: it is a holistic art that develops creativity and theatricality and offers its own path towards spirituality. Since adepts need to train hard in a wide range of bodily techniques and intellectual skills, it also constitutes a martial art and, according to some, a spiritual discipline.

Capoeira furthermore provides a new identity, which is why it has become so important in our globalized world. Over the last half century, the practice of capoeira has spread from some relatively limited constituencies, in terms of geography, class, gender and ethnicity, to an ever-growing number of adepts in Brazil. During the 1980s and 1990s, capoeira expanded into Western Europe and the United States and is now practised in countries as diverse as Australia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Mozambique, Poland, Singapore, Switzerland, South Africa, and Venezuela. Conservative estimates for 1998 suggested that already 3 million people around the world were practising capoeira, a number that has been growing ever since.[3] Capoeira has not only its own jargon and organizations, but also its own fashion, hundreds of fanzines and thousands of websites. Googling for capoeira results in 229,000 hits. This might still be less than the results for *aikido* (551,000), *judo* (899,000), *karate* (1.5 million) or boxing (2.750 million)—but capoeira is rapidly catching up with these more established martial arts or combat sports.[4]

During the 1990s, capoeira became another expression of postmodern chic, in the same way as mobile phones. In recognizing the link, a major company from Finland (Nokia) has made wide use of capoeira in its advertising. Capoeira is now seen as an integral part of the postmodern experience in globalized metropolises. Thus one of the new television channel indicators broadcast by the BBC in the United Kingdom features capoeira players on the roofs of London. They embody 'cool Britannia' and the new audiences British television aims to reach.[5] This book attempts to reconstruct the ways in which a disdained slave pastime and feared bodily weapon became a hip game for a whole generation.

Capoeira has a fascinating history. It features African warriors and their initiation cults, the horrors of the Middle Passage,[6] black slaves fighting policemen on the squares of colonial cities in the New World, and gangs of 'tough guys' promoting mayhem, terrorizing citizens or helping corrupt politician to rig elections. Capoeiristas confronted Portuguese stick fighters in the streets and Japanese *ju-jitsu* champions in the ring. They were flogged, imprisoned, and deported to distant Atlantic islands because of their practice. The military, bureaucrats and the tourist industry tried and sometimes succeeded in co-opting them. Yet one of the reasons capoeira fascinates young people all over the world is that it still seems to epitomize resistance: against the slave owner, the police, the establishment. One of the aims of this book is to show to what extent resistance was or was not a rhetorical device in capoeira history, and to question easy assumptions about the meaning of resistance.

History is paramount in contemporary capoeira practice. Not only do capoeira songs invoke famous players long dead and call to mind epic fights of the past, but they also refer to more embracing historical institutions, such as slavery and the resistance against it, wars fought by Brazilian soldiers, or any other episode that represented at some moment a landmark in popular memory. Not only the songs, but also the entire practice constitutes a 'commemorative performance', a re-enactment of capoeira's 'sinister past'. As Greg Downey has pointed out:

> This past gives capoeira play gravity, revealing that capoeira was once a 'deep and sinister business', and menacingly suggests the possibility that it may still be. The *roda* of capoeira, especially among those who self-consciously cultivate 'traditional' practice, is a play space haunted by an epic history.[7]

Precisely because the past is at the very core of the game, every statement regarding capoeira history is likely to have serious implications for contemporary practice and the way practitioners and wider society perceive the art. During the twentieth century a number of competing versions of its history and, more particularly, its origins developed, emphasizing capoeira either as a New World 'invention' or as an African 'extension'. Each of these conflicting interpretations sought to prove what the supposed 'essence' of capoeira is: African or Brazilian; a fight disguised in dance or a dance which became a fight.

The importance attributed to tradition, in particular to orally transmitted narratives, the role capoeira played and plays as a model of counter-hegemonic practice, the re-appropriation of the art by state institutions or by political activists pursuing their own agendas have all contributed to the establishment of powerful myths about capoeira history and the development of some master narratives. These all-pervasive discourses, in return, structure the perception of present-day practitioners and wider audiences. The two extracts from capoeira songs I used as an epigraph illustrate to what extent capoeira adepts, although practising the same art, can diverge over the meaning of its history, or over the significance of key figures in the Afro-Brazilia n experience. Princess Isabel, who in 1888 signed the 'Golden Law' abolishing slavery in Brazil, has for a long time been praised in capoeira circles as the philanthropic emancipator. Yet the emergence of Black movements in Brazil during the 1980s led to a fundamental re-assessment of her role, which is conveyed by the second, more recent and critical 'litany' (the introductory song in capoeira).

From the 1930s onward, the development of different modern styles generated even more heated controversies around the figures of their two founding fathers, the *mestres* (teacher, master) Bimba and Pastinha. Two conflicting master narratives again support divergent interpretations of the meaning of their innovations and, more generally, the modernization of cultural forms.

Before examining the history of capoeira, one needs to be aware of these fundamental assumptions that guide capoeiristas, scholars and other social actors in their appreciation of capoeira history. I will attempt to give a brief idea of how master narratives were constructed, by tracing their emergence within specific historical contexts and relating them to ongoing struggles over ethnic and national identity in Brazilian society, and, more recently, in a globalized context (Chapter 1). Capoeira, the black art of the male underdog, provides an important field where issues of race, class and gender are played out and renegotiated.

The second chapter discusses the polemical questions of the origin of capoeira by placing the art within the wider context of Black Atlantic and Afro-Brazilian popular culture and raises the general issue of cultural hybridity, commonly discussed in this more specific context under the term 'creolization'. Capoeira provides a prime example of this process and thus allows for a better understanding of what complex dynamics creolization can entail. Conceiving capoeira as a creole art of the diaspora also avoids the pitfall of classifying a colonial form with anachronistic labels such as African or Brazilian and to disentangle the conundrum of its roots. I believe that we need to analyse the interaction between forms and context rather than searching for a genealogy of isolated elements of the art.

The third chapter deals with the *capoeiragem* in Rio de Janeiro during the nineteenth century, practised by slaves and freedmen, but also by European migrants, and how its practice was affected by these changes. The fourth chapter introduces the capoeira or 'vagrancy' in Bahia, which was the direct ancestor of modern capoeira. The contrast between these two regional variants of capoeira, and their distinct evolution, highlights the complex dynamics between formal aspects, social context and cultural meaning which allowed the development of elaborate rituals and bodily techniques. This also allows one to question—without discarding it entirely—the mantra of capoeira as resistance and to assess the importance of co-optation in these formative periods.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at the *mestres* who were paramount in the development of modern capoeira during the 1930s and 1940s, M.Bimba and M.Pastinha, and the emergence of the Regional and Angola styles. The last chapter (follows) the spread of capoeira throughout Brazil and the Western world during the last four decades and discusses the significance of contemporary styles. A closer look at these developments shows how modernization of a popular tradition is never homogenous or monolithic, but fragmented and multi-faceted, according to the multiple agendas of the different social actors involved. The examination of the recent worldwide dissemination of capoeira finally allows an insight into the cultural dynamics of globalization during the 1990s. At a time when capoeira runs the risk of becoming a mere commodity for globalized consumers, and of being hijacked for all kinds of other purposes, I think it is important to show, against all essentialist simplifications, that the art is the result of a rich and complex history. The awareness of the rich and contradictory texture of its traditions is necessary to avoid capoeira becoming a short-lived fashion that will disappear when it no longer fulfils the requirements of global markets, because it can provide inspiration for new strategies of resistance.

~~elaboration and the dissemination of some master narratives that structure perceptions of and discourses about capoeira until the present day. These myths are but the crystallized, quintessential form of preconceived ideas about the development of capoeira or history in general. A myth is one of several available resources to reinforce the attraction of a particular master narrative, supporting the latter through its apparent logic and naturalness. In the following chapters I hope to demonstrate that capoeira history is far more contradictory and ambiguous—more than some of its practitioners might like.~~

~~For the sake of analysis I distinguish six paradigmatic discourses or master narratives, and try to locate their emergence in specific historical contexts. This is not possible without simplification. Positions are often more nuanced than I will represent them here, and sometimes overlap, combining arguments from several narratives. I nevertheless believe that this exercise will help the reader, especially the one unacquainted with current debates, to grasp what wider interests structure the field of capoeira history since the nineteenth century. The analysis of these narratives hopefully will illuminate the relevance of some painstaking discussions considered in the subsequent chapters of this book.~~

~~To reconstruct the various levels and types of discourses on capoeira that were elaborated by different social actors over time is an arduous task. Intellectuals and academics, government and authorities were not the only ones to formulate their views on capoeira. Yet only very occasionally can we get a glimpse of what nineteenth-century slave or free practitioners thought about their art. Nevertheless their views and practices clearly had an impact on the way authorities or intellectuals reflected on capoeira, and we have therefore to consider the problem of their interaction. Circularity undeniably existed between these different actors (practitioners, authorities, elites, scholars) and became stronger—and more visible—during the twentieth century. Since the 'order of discourse' tends to eradicate subaltern viewpoints, any attempt to reconstruct the formation of capoeira narratives risks to overestimate the impact of middle-class intellectuals. Although aware of that danger, I still think it is worthwhile to attempt to explain how master narratives on capoeira developed. My focus in this chapter is therefore on the history of ideologies, with only occasional references to institutions or social backgrounds when necessary.~~

'Extirpate the canker': Eurocentric repression

The first discourse about capoeira we know of emphatically condemned the practice and implemented every possible means to eradicate it. First formulated by police officers and politicians, it was taken on board by the ruling elite and the middle class of urban slave owners. The elaboration of this discourse took place in a very specific historical moment and context, namely after the transmigration of the Portuguese court to Brazil, in 1808. For almost 14 years Rio de Janeiro became the provisional capital of the Portuguese Empire, before converting into the capital of a new empire in the tropics.

Until then, capoeira does not—as far as we know—figure in police records, mainly because no police really worth that name existed. For most of the colonial period, unarmed civilian watchmen had been in charge of 'rudimentary vigilance' in the city. Hired by the town council, they had no legal power of arrest.[14] The transmigration of the Portuguese court to the capital of a colony based on slave labour raised a range of security issues. Hence one of the first measures adopted by the prince regent João VI consisted in the establishment of a Police Intendant in Rio, and, subordinated to him, a Royal Police Guard, both replicas of similar institutions in Lisbon, themselves inspired by earlier French models. As Thomas Holloway, author of the most thorough study on the topic, states, 'Capoeira was one of a range of "offences against the public order" that in themselves injured no person or property, but which those who set the rules and established the police found unacceptable'. Among all forms of behaviour considered improper by the elites, capoeira was always considered the most dangerous one for public safety. For that reason any slave or freedman caught *in flagrante,* even though without doing any harm to property or persons, was to suffer immediate 'correction' in the form of brutal whipping. The arbitrary character of both the establishment of the rule and the 'correction' for its violation should not cause surprise, since the discourse of repression originated within the structures of an absolutist monarchy of the so called ancien régime. What is remarkable is rather how this discourse was adapted and survived the political changes of the subsequent period.

Brazilian Independence came in the form of a constitutional monarchy, which recognized civil rights (the right to vote, freedom of association, habeas corpus, etc.) for its citizens. These rights were enshrined in the 1824 Constitution, and granted to all Brazilians, including former slaves—as long as they were born in Brazil and not in Africa. In theory, and if they had the necessary property qualifications, freedmen thus enjoyed political rights (although subjected to several restrictions, not being eligible for any office). Slaves were not granted any rights, and were barely mentioned in the founding text of the nation. In practice, however, not only slaves, but freedmen and even the free poor remained subjected to the arbitrary practices of the police, suffering arrest, summary punishments in the form of whipping, and detention without trial.

Adapting the new liberal ideology to a highly stratified slave society that relied on heavy physical coercion to control even the poorer segment of its free population represented a major dilemma for Brazilian elites. Several attempts in the 1820s and 1830s to make police and judicial practice conform to liberal principles were met with strong opposition from conservative elites and civil servants alike and ultimately failed. On the other side, the criminalization of cultural practices such as capoeira was not consistent with liberal ideology, and legislators therefore found it difficult to formally outlaw its practice. This contradiction resulted in the curious situation whereby capoeira was neither included in the Criminal Code of the Empire (1830) nor any other law voted by parliament, and not even the municipal laws of the city of Rio.[15] Thus the repression of capoeira, albeit constant during the Empire, relied mainly on edicts and regulations issued by local police chiefs or similar authorities, which identified capoeira as a dangerous and disorderly practice.

The discourse advocating outright repression of capoeira was so hegemonic during most of the nineteenth century, that even scholars genuinely committed to the study of popular culture such as Sílvio Romero (1851–1914) despised the art and only lamented that: 'The Police could never extirpate this canker.'[16] The celebrated writer [Joaquim Maria] Machado de Assis (1839–1908) asserted that the main reason capoeiras sliced up other peoples' stomachs was the 'eroticism of publicity' and suggested therefore that newspapers should stop writing about them.[17]

After the proclamation of the republic (1889), the extinction of capoeira ranked even higher in the government's priority. Capoeira was now seen as representing a hideous practice reflecting lower class, and particularly African, barbarism. It became therefore again paramount to eliminate this obstacle to progress. For the new rulers, inspired by the authoritarian ideologies of conservative modernization such as positivism and social Darwinism, the elimination of capoeira became part of the necessary hygienization of Brazil's capital. They therefore had few scruples in formally outlawing capoeira. The Criminal Code of 1890 dedicated one chapter to Vagrants and capoeiras'. The first three articles criminalized idleness; the last three exclusively dealt with capoeira (see Chapter 3).

Although now finally enshrined in the Criminal Code of the Republic, the discourse of repression started to be challenged by a growing numbers of middle-class and elite individuals. Even though no longer hegemonic after the 1940s, the longevity of that discourse had long lasting effects. The association of capoeira with the underworld of vagrancy, crime and marginality was not completely inaccurate; it nevertheless did not take into account the insertion of many, if not most *capoeiras* in the world of labour (see Chapters 3 and 4). It therefore not only contributed in strengthening prejudices—even amongst the popular classes—against *capoeiras,* but also reinforced many of the clichés about capoeira which still haunt the art today, namely that it encourages idleness and violence.

In search of the 'Brazilian race': nationalism I

The construction of national symbols in Brazil has been, as elsewhere, subjected to periodical redefinitions. The very meaning of what constituted a nation evolved substantially since the late eighteenth century, when it only meant people borne by the same mother or, by extension, from similar ancestry. The term was even used to denote opposition to civilized or Christian *peoples,* and that is why European colonial sources so frequently refer to African *nations*. During most of the nineteenth century intellectuals and politicians argued about the 'national principle'; discussions then evolved around the 'national idea' or the 'national question'. These changes in terminology reflect shifts in emphasis on how the nation was to be defined: by territory, language, religion, race or political loyalties.[18]

The first substantial elaboration of what supposedly constituted the Brazilian national character coincided with the Age of Revolution in the Atlantic world and the period of decolonization in the Americas, 1773–1848.[19] Even though all free groups did have their own ideas about what it meant to be Brazilian, the dominant groups imposed their hierarchical and exclusive model. The aftermath of independence in Brazil (1822) coincided with the establishment of Romanticism as the predominant art movement among the literary elites. The tropical nature of most of the Brazilian territory, which had already impressed colonial writers of European origin, furnished an evergreen theme to define the nation. Building on the pastoral tropes of the Enlightenment, romantic writers exalted in even stronger colours the Brazilian nature. They founded a core national myth that was to have a long lasting impact on the national imagination.[20]

The elites' search for the national roots of Brazilian identity, keen to distance itself not only from the former colonizer, the Portuguese, but also from the enslaved Africans considered inferior, concentrated therefore on its original inhabitants. Native Brazilians seemed to provide an outstanding example of a life in harmony with nature. Writers such as José de Alencar and Gonçalves Dias exploited the edenic motive of the Indian in the Brazilian wilderness. In their work, the native Indian is stylized and romantically transfigured into a medieval knight. The first literary symbol of Brazilian-ness hence resembled a key character of European romanticism. It is here that we can locate the remote origins of the myth that depicts capoeira as a creation inspired by the Brazilian nature.

Intellectuals were by no means the only ones to devise symbols of identity and nationhood. Other social groups had quite different perceptions of the nation. The urban lower classes generally couched their 'nativist' reactions against colonialism in strong anti-colonial and anti-Portuguese language. As in many other national struggles for independence, the bashing of metropolitans (insulted as *caiados* or 'white washed') became a common feature of political conflict during and after decolonization in Brazil. Popular lusophobia might not have been more than a negative way of defining the national character, but it re-emerged later in the century and was always strongly associated with extreme nationalism. Although sources are not very extensive about popular views of the emerging nation, some documents from mainly urban rebellions suggest that a radical version of liberalism advocated equal rights for citizens of all colours, only excluding the African slaves. Harsh repression, however, drove more inclusive visions of a democratic empire into oblivion or at least limited their wider impact.

Even though the resident Portuguese insulted Brazilian patriots in return as *cabras* (goats, dark skinned mulattos), it seems that these rarely adopted African ancestry or even miscegenation as a positive value. Most, especially the lighter-skinned patriots, preferred to identify instead with the Native Americans. Many adopted Indian names as a way to distance themselves from Iberian roots without having to associate with symbols of Afro-Brazilian culture.

As racial theories became hegemonic in nineteenth-century European science, the racial factor gained more and more weight in the discussions about the national character. Brazilian intellectuals were thus caught in a rather unenviable dilemma: They could hardly challenge European science without ridiculing themselves, but accepting racial determinism invariably led to a pessimist assessment of their country's possibilities of development. Hence most appraisals after the 1860s tended to lament the racial handicap of Brazilians whose ancestors were, in their majority, Africans or Indians.[21] Nineteenth-century European racial theories were however far from uniform. They all shared, unsurprisingly, the belief in white superiority, but clashed over crucial aspects such as the meaning of miscegenation. Polygenic approaches tended to dismiss *mestiços* as degenerate or even sterile (*mulato* is derived from mule!), whereas monogenic theories eventually allowed for the racial 'improvement' of a population. Some Brazilian scholars very skilfully picked out the aspects of different theories that suited them most, and developed their own conceptions. Prominent among these was the theory of 'whitening', whereby a population with inferior racial characteristics, such as the Brazilian, could improve over time through the continuous influx of white immigrants. At the time of its conception, the ideology of whitening therefore seemed to offer an alternative to the absolute pessimism that haunted so many Brazilian intellectuals during the period 1870–1930.[22]

What is important to emphasize, however, is that these conceptions of the *mestiço,* far from representing a neutral middle ground where the three original 'races' fused, only designated an intermediate stage in the 'whitening' process, not a final destination. Miscegenation was positive only insofar as it led to more and more people becoming white and adopting the 'superior' European culture. It is precisely because ideologies enhancing the positive values of miscegenation have been historically associated with the whitening ideology promoting an assimilationist model that black movements tend to dismiss all of them as a white strategy of ethnocide.[23]

Not all intellectuals advocated such extreme assimilation, because it was so obviously in contradiction with Brazilian reality. Since the creation of the Historical and Geographical Institute, in 1838, a more historicist tradition had gained a foothold in Brazil. Karl von Martius, author of one of the founding texts of the institution, albeit recognizing the racial and cultural superiority of the Portuguese, had already insisted that 'the genius of world history' 'frequently resorts to mixing the races to obtain the world order's most sublime ends' and argued for example that the English nation also owed its national character to the mixture of different peoples.[24] The *mestiço* could therefore, according to some, become a new racial type, and by the same token, lose the negative characteristics most racial theorists associated with the unstable 'mixed blood'.

The Germanophile Sílvio Romero, author of the first *History of Brazilian Literature* (1888) was a precursor in that direction. Although he initially almost despaired over the racial handicap of Brazilians and even dismissed the dominant Iberian stock as inferior when compared to the Germanic sub-types, he considered the possibility of a new, original *mestiço* type, a result of race mixture and the environment. Not only did he advocate the study of the customs of the Brazilian people, but also made important contributions towards that end, in particular in the field of popular poetry, following the German romantic model of searching cultural roots of the nation in its folklore. His method consisted in identifying the original elements that the *mestiço* combined.

Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909) made a further, extremely influential contribution in his book *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902), where he suggested that the Brazilian *mestiço* had already developed specific characteristics. He described the emergence of a messianic leader, Antônio Conselheiro, and the war of extermination the Brazilian army waged against him and his 20,000 followers, denigrated as 'fanatics' and monarchists by the press. Although initially da Cunha wanted to prove the degeneration of the *mestiço,* he became so impressed with the heroic resistance of the charismatic leader and his supporters, that he concluded the isolation of the semiarid *sertão* (backlands) did have positive effects on the racial type (which was rather in contradiction to his theoretical assumptions). Da Cunha was part of a whole generation of writers, such as Capistrano de Abreu and Coelho Neto, who stigmatized the cities as Europeanized whereas the true Brazil was to be found in the vast interior.[25] The idea that 'authentic' cultural manifestations were located in the backlands became another persistent theme that re-emerged again in capoeira history, reappearing for instance in the already mentioned myth of the maroon capoeira.

In summary, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the *mestiço* provided intellectuals searching for the national character with a new subject on which to graft their theories. The advantage of the new way of defining the Brazilian nation was that miscegenation and its outcome, the *mestiço* , 'allowed constructing the image of a homogenous social totality'.[26] This became ever more crucial as new waves of immigrants were disembarking on the country's shores in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Racial theories also shaped immigration policies. 'Industrious' European workers were supposed to improve the 'Brazilian race' through whitening. Black labourers from Africa or North America were clearly undesirable, and even Asians (Chinese) were initially rejected, though a quarter of a million Japanese were later allowed to enter the country. This shift in policy reflects not only a lack of firm consensus among the elites, but also an important change in the ways foreign migrants were perceived and integrated. As enthusiasm for European workers was tamed by their labour activism or their unwillingness to assimilate, intellectuals and politicians increasingly worried about the consequences of massive immigration for nation building and the need to construct a Brazilian identity not based on the emulation of European models or a linear process of whitening.

Popular resentment against the favouritism Portuguese male migrants commonly enjoyed when applying for jobs or competing for Brazilian women expressed itself in the revival of the anti-Portuguese imagery in the independence period. The so-called Jacobins, a radical nationalist, pro-republican movement in the 1880s and 1890s, built upon these resentments to gather support in Rio de Janeiro, the city with the largest Portuguese community. This context of growing ethnic diversity, resulting in the multiplication of 'hyphenated identities', can explain the national obsession with a homogenous *mestiço* representing Brazil.[27]

Given the intense discussions among Brazilians regarding national character and race, it is not surprising that the two founding texts of capoeira studies written in the 1880s associate the art with the *mestiço.* Plácido de Abreu, a Portuguese-born writer and bohemian, a practitioner of capoeira himself, denied that it had African or Indigenous origins: 'The most rational [explanation] is that *capoeiragem* was created, developed and perfected among us [in Brazil]'.[28] The decisive contribution for the association of capoeira and the national character came from Alexandro José Mello Moraes Filho (1844–1919). Contrary to Romero (who prefaced his work), Mello Moraes disapproved of large-scale European immigration and the Europeanization of customs heralded by the elite as the only means to progress. He advocated that urban popular culture, in particular the Catholic festivals, constituted the privileged site where the Brazilian national character had developed.[29] His classic account *Festivals and Popular Traditions,* first published in 1888, described both secular and religious festivals and celebrations, mainly in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, always reputed to be more Luso-tropical than the Europeanized South.[30]

In the last section of his book, dedicated to 'street types', he portrayed *capoeiragem* as 'a heritage of miscegenation and the conflict of races'.[31] Quoting the examples of European games and fights, from antique Roman wrestling to French *savate,* Portuguese stick fighting or British rowing and boxing, he concluded that they 'contribute to add a further feature to the national physiognomy', and that capoeira should therefore be considered as part of the 'history of our customs'. Given that, at the same time, capoeira was perceived as a major threat by the elites and vigorously persecuted by the new Republican regime (see Chapter 3), Mello Moraes took great pains to justify the practice. In order to dismiss the negative aspects of what he considered the 'national fight' ('luta nacional'), he constructed a golden age of capoeira, which he located in the first half of the nineteenth century, when capoeira was an art that developed strength, flexibility and speed and had not yet 'degenerated' into disorderly behaviour, such as homicides and aggression. As Letícia Reis has shown, Mello Moraes needed to invert the basic chronology of capoeira development in order to support his argument.[32] He emphasized the skills of middle-class officers or teachers in the art, supposedly before the 'national fight was enthusiastically taken to excesses by the lower classes'. The nationalist discourse was already influencing perceptions and structuring interpretations of capoeira, misrepresenting a black slave practice as a *mestiço* art.

The celebrated writer Aluísio Azevedo (1857–1913) provided the perfect literary illustration of Mello Moraes' argument. His novel *'A Brazilian Tenement'*, first published in 1890, describes one of the *cortiços* ('beehives'), the dilapidated, unhygienic downtown dwellings where ex-slaves and poor Portuguese migrants lived next to each other.[33] The plot revolves around Rita Baiana, the stereotypical mulatto beauty, courted by both the Portuguese stonecutter Jerônimo and the Brazilian Firmo, also a mulatto. In the final confrontation between the two rival males, which symbolizes the wider conflict between Portuguese and Afro-Brazilians, both make use of their national fighting art: Jerônimo grasps his fighting stick, and Firmo, chief of a capoeira gang, employs his *mandinga* to avoid blows and finally slices his opponent's stomach up with a razor. Azevedo's naturalist approach made him draw a rather unfavourable or even pathological picture of lower-class behaviour, but he helped to consecrate capoeira as the typical art of the urban *mestiço*.

As I hope to have made clear, the shifting significance of *mestiço* identities in the construction of a Brazilian national discourse affected the meaning of capoeira from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards. As national identities were constructed more and more around popular cultural manifestations, and elites became increasingly aware that the only observable homogeneity of the Brazilian people consisted in an immense array of mixtures, the attitude towards capoeira evolved substantially. At the very moment capoeira was being eradicated from the streets of Rio de Janeiro by ruthless repression, the absolute criminalization of its practice was increasingly questioned by a growing number of middle-class people. They adopted a more benevolent even if still highly ambivalent attitude towards the art, because they considered it a possible tool in the construction of Brazilian identity. Yet for capoeira to become a marker of Brazilian-ness, its slave origins had to be hidden and its *mestiço* character emphasized.

The search for a Brazilian gymnastics: nationalism II

The growth of imperialist rivalries in the decades prior to World War I seemed to confirm the teachings of Social Darwinism on a global scale: survival was only possible for the fittest and strongest nations. Since drafted conscripts were now fighting in large scale wars, strategists underlined the importance of national recruits—and therefore the entire male population—being well trained. Early attempts to develop specifically national methods of training began in Europe during the early nineteenth century. In Denmark Franz Nachtegall (1777–1847) had founded the Military Institute of Gymnastics in 1804; physical education became a compulsory discipline in Danish schools as early as 1814. In Germany Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1776–1839) built the first gymnastics ground (*Turnplatz*) in 1811, initiating the movement of Gymnastics Associations (*Turnvereine*). Ever since, gymnastics has been seen as a means to improve the male fitness of the nation and therefore its martial capacity. For that reason the military have always been associated with the search for national gymnastics.

Yet the use and abuse of Brazilian-ness also relates to more genuine needs for identity affirmation in an increasingly globalized world. Given the 'Americanization' of culture on a global scale, capoeira has become for Brazilians—alongside samba and football—an important tool in the struggle to resist cultural imperialism, to reaffirm their national identity and to highlight their contribution to international popular culture. In that respect it is understandable how legitimately shocked they feel when confronted with the competing ethno-nationalist discourse advocating the African character of capoeira.

The search for purity and survivals: ethnic perspectives

Although no direct testimonies from slave *capoeiras* survived, some sources suggest that the game provided a space for the expression of African ethnic identities. Slaves caught playing capoeira in the 1810s and 1820s often displayed markers of their particular ethnic origins, such as hats or feathers. As capoeira in Rio became more creolized, affiliations with particular gangs tended to replace earlier expressions of ethnic identity (see Chapter 3). In Bahia, however, capoeira continued to be associated with Africa, in particular with slaves from Kongo and Angola—generically known as 'Angolas'—and their descendants. Schoolteacher and reformer Manuel Querino (1851–1923), to whom we owe one of the first detailed accounts of the art in Salvador, reported that capoeira was known as a 'game' (*brinquedo*) and had been introduced to Brazil by the slaves from Angola. Following Mello Moraes in Rio, he enhanced the folkloric side of capoeira and suggested it ranked equally to other national sports. Querino, an Afro-Brazilian, did not support the dominant racist theories of his time, perhaps an indication that these were less pervasive among non-white Brazilians than some scholars seem to suggest. Yet he still occasionally indulged in ethnic stereotyping, describing 'the Angola' as 'generally pedantic, excessively chatty, with affected gestures'. He contrasted Bahian and Rio folklore, and the heroism of the Northeastern capoeira with his Cariocan counterpart, which he judged to be a 'dangerous element'.[55]

Since Salvador did not experience comparable levels of European or Asian migration, its population continued to be overwhelmingly of African descent after the abolition of slavery. Direct trade links with the West African coast and some other factors facilitated the reconstitution of particular African identities in the forms of 'nations' (see Chapter 4). The existence of a particularly vibrant Afro-Brazilian community and culture was certainly paramount to the development of a local school of thought that sought to study Bahian religion and culture. Both the search for a national character and the fears over the degeneration of the 'Brazilian race' fostered a fresh interest in Afro-Brazilian culture. Raymundo Nina Rodrigues (1862–1906), professor of medicine in Salvador, is credited with the founding of the 'Bahian school' of Afro-Brazilian studies. He still remained within the paradigms of European racial theories of his time, advocating for instance, that Negroes and Indians, being racially inferior, could not be expected to behave like whites and thus the Criminal Code should not treat them as equals.[56] Yet the intimate knowledge of Afro-Bahia religion made him realize that Brazilian society had not succeeded in 'desafricanizing the Negro'; Catholic catechesis remained 'an illusion'.[57] He campaigned against police repression of Afro-Brazilian cults on the grounds that *candomblé* was a religion that corresponded to the level of development of the Negro. His commitment to research different aspects of Afro-Bahian culture resulted not only in precursor studies but also influenced a whole generation of younger scholars that continued his research. His appreciation of the different levels of popular religiosity had a long-lasting impact. Rodrigues distinguished between the 'superior animism' of the 'Sudanese' (Jeje and Yoruba) and the 'narrow fetishism' of the 'most backward tribes' (the 'Bantus' from Kongo/Angola). According to him, the Brazilian *mestiços*—many of which adopted the *candomblé de Angola* or *de caboclo*—had the same intellectual level as the Bantus.[58]

Artur Ramos (1903–1949), a bachelor of the Faculty of Medicine as well, continued and expanded Nina Rodrigues' work. He founded the Brazilian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology (1941) and promoted the study of race relations while director of the social science department of UNESCO in Paris. Although he did not take on board his master's anthropological theories, he was still indebted to evolutionism, in particular to the French scholar Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). If Ramos no longer believed in the racial inferiority of the Negro, he was still convinced that blacks possessed a pre-logical mentality and an inferior culture, which was condemned to disappear.[59] Ramos among others propagated in Brazil the theories developed by US anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1895–1963), in particular his concept of acculturation. According to Herskovits, a situation of contact between two unequal cultures produced three different outcomes: acceptance, adaptation or reaction. Acceptance meant the culture of the colonizer was assimilated, resulting in the loss of the former culture. This, predicted Artur Ramos, was to be the final destination for the black groups in Brazil and elsewhere. Reaction designated the rejection of acculturation, resulting in the maintenance of the original cultures, as expressed in some counter-acculturative movements. Adaptation, the intermediate solution, was, according to Ramos, the most common result of the slaves' acculturation in the New World. 'The Black cultures combined with patterns of white culture, in a historical mosaic, where it is often difficult to recognize the original elements'.[60]

Even though Ramos treated elements of black culture as mere 'survivals', he considered not only religion but also folklore as 'royal avenues' that reveal the 'collective unconscious' of the Negro. His work on 'Negro Folklore' thus identified African 'totemic survivals' in Brazil, 'disguised' in the numerous manifestations of popular culture.[61] Ramos' mention of African combat games and dances such as the *cufuinha* of the Lunda people inspired his friend and collaborator Carneiro to consider in 1936, for the first time, a direct African ancestor for capoeira—a suggestion unfortunately ignored by later scholars (see Chapter 2).[62]

The writer and journalist Edison Carneiro (1912–1972) is widely known for his work on Afro-Bahian religion and as a campaigner for the defence of Brazilian folklore. His precursor study of Bahian capoeira identified the art with the Angolas and recognized that capoeira incorporated 'fetichist elements' in the songs and rituals, a result of syncretism and adaption of originally religious meanings. Despite acknowledging the 'enormous vitality' of capoeira, Carneiro considered that the art, especially capoeira de Angola, was on its way to extinction.[63] This did not prevent him from actively promoting capoeira as an expression of black culture, and to fight for the decriminalization of its manifestations. Thus a capoeira performance was included in the programme of the Second Afro-Brazilian Congress he organized in Salvador in 1937 (see Chapter 6). From that moment capoeira started to be recognized as an important expression of ethnic identity, and more particularly as a marker of the Bantu contribution to Afro-Brazilian culture.

The study of Afro-Brazilian culture was profoundly altered from the 1940s onwards with the contribution of the French sociologist Roger Bastide (1898–1974). Bastide broke with the ethnocentric paradigm of earlier studies postulating the inferiority or the 'pre-logical' mentality of the Africans and Afro-Brazilians. Moving a way from the pathologizing approaches towards Afro-Brazilian religion, Bastide demonstrated the rationality of *candomblé* and trance. His work not only inspired a generation of scholars, but was also very popular among *candomblé* priests.[64] There is one aspect of his work, however, which perpetuated the distinction between a 'higher' West African (Jeje-Nagô) culture and a 'lower' Central African (Bantu) culture established by Nina Rodrigues. For Bastide the Nagô cult houses were committed to the maintenance of African traditions, whilst the *terreiros* identified with the Bantus (*candomblé de Angola* in Bahia, *macumba* in Rio de Janeiro) were more inclined to accept assimilation and syncretism. He thus lamented their 'disaggregation'. Bastide asserted that the Bantu contribution was more important in folklore than in religion, supposedly because Angolan slaves were preferred for fieldwork and thus more numerous on plantations than in the cities. Capoeira de Angola and other Bantu dances figured, however, prominently among what Bastide called the 'African' (as opposed to the Negro and European-derived) folklore in the Americas. We also owe to him a pioneering attempt to compare capoeira with other combat games in the Caribbean.[65]

The reassessment of African roots in Bahia was not initiated by intellectuals alone, but reflected the growing vitality of the wider Afro-Bahian community and its ultimately successful strategy in facing repression.[66] The very idea of Nagô purity versus Bantu hybridity seems to have relied to a large extent on views prevailing among the priests of Nagô shrines.[67] Close personal relations linked the most traditionalist terreiros in Salvador to scholars such as Nina Rodrigues, Ramos, Carneiro, Bastide and Verger (who were all to some degree initiated and awarded honorary positions). This support certainly helped the most prestigious Nagô cult houses to escape police persecution and to obtain wider recognition in local society.

The discourse of Nagô purity became hegemonic after the 1930s and still lingers on in many quarters in Brazil. Its implications are however more ambiguous than one might think at first sight; indeed the idea of Nagô authenticity can also serve as a strategy of domination. The revaluation of one single African tradition can be instrumental in demoting the culture of the majority of blacks who followed other, in particular more syncretic manifestations, such as the *candomblés de caboclo*. The idea of Nagô purity was also used to legitimize the myth of the Brazilian 'racial democracy' and furthermore served the purpose of marketing the most exotic aspects of Afro-Bahian culture.[68]

From 'survivals' to 'extensions': Afrocentric narratives

In October 1941, Renato Almeida gave a paper on the 'Play of Capoeira' at the Brazilian Society for Archaeology and Ethnology—probably the first academic seminar on the most famous Brazilian martial art. On that occasion, the distinguished North American Professor Melville J.Herskovits commented that he had seen similar combat games in Africa and in different locations in the Americas.[69] His observation, however, was to be ignored for several decades because it did not suit the nationalist discourse emphasizing the uniqueness of the Brazilian art. Equally ignored were local attempts to revitalize traditional capoeira in Bahia (see Chapter 6).

In contrast to nationalist Brazilian discourses, transatlantic approaches towards capoeira have only in recent times conquered greater public space. Because they have been marginalized from academic institutions and mainstream publishing until recently there is not the same density of material or even research. Afrocentric perspectives have provided an important critique of Brazilian nationalist claims regarding the origins and characteristics of capoeira over the last years. Even though they share some of the perspectives of discourses emphasizing the ethnic character of the art, they can also be quite distinct in their conclusions from the narratives we discussed so far. Some of them actively promote a pan-African agenda which impacts heavily on the way capoeira is perceived and re-appropriated.

In 1965, the Angolan artist Álbano Neves e Sousa visited Brazil. His journey was part of a wider pursuit. Neves e Sousa aimed to document the multiple links between popular cultures of the Portuguese colonies in Africa and Brazil, anticipating thus the idea of a 'Black Atlantic'. His drawings and comments point out similarities in the material culture (dwellings, food, clothes) and street festivals in Angola, Cabo Verde, Guiné Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Brazil. Neves e Sousa seems to have been particularly impressed by how Angolan Brazil still was. The epigraph to his work, published later in Angola, stated: 'Let them say what they will…but if Portugal fathered Brazil, Angola was the Black Mother on whose lap the child grew.'[70]