

## Resistance From the Inside: An Analysis of the *jogo de dentro* in Brazilian *Capoeira Angola*

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### Introduction

"Eu sou angoleira  
angoleira sim eu sou"<sup>1</sup>  
I am a capoeira angola player  
a capoeira angola player yes I am

Capoeira is a movement practice from Brazil that evades classification. It is movement to music, but it is not considered a dance form; it is an interaction between two people in front of an audience combining both rehearsed and improvised material, but it is not theater; it is arguably a martial art, but there is little contact between the players. The players of capoeira or *capoeiristas* take turns in the roles of movers, musicians and observers. *Capoeiristas* call it a game, or *jogo de capoeira*, but in this game there are no winners or losers, just players.

In this paper I will analyze the element of resistance in *capoeira angola*, a type of capoeira that sets itself apart by defining itself as a tool of political and cultural resistance to an oppressive hegemonic structure referred to as "the system." In order to understand capoeira's defining element of resistance, I will briefly discuss the history of capoeira in Brazil — its long history of oppression, the period of illegality and particularly the period when capoeira's Africinity was consciously stripped away. I will then look at contemporary capoeira angola as a tradition that affirms and validates Afro-Brazilian identity. I will examine capoeira angola's internal rules and movement codes as tools of resistance to an often racist hegemony where Afro-Brazilians are discriminated against and denied the same socio-economic opportunities available to Brazilians of European descent.

This paper is based on eight months of research in Brazil,<sup>2</sup> where I immersed myself in the study and practice of capoeira angola with Mestre Jogo de Dentro in the group *Semente do Jogo de Angola*.

### Rescuing *Capoeira Angola*: A Brief History

"Saí do Congo passei por Angola  
Cheguei aqui hoje para vadiar angola"  
I left the Congo, I stopped in Angola  
I arrived here today to be a capoeira angola bum

Capoeira is the result of the African influences brought to Brazil during the slave trade. Brazil alone imported around 3,646,800 slaves (Curtin 1969: 49) during its approximate 300 years of participation in the trade, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. It was not until 1888 that slavery was officially abolished, when the *Lei Áurea* was signed by Princess Isabel.<sup>3</sup>

During the period of slavery, capoeira was repressed and slaves who were caught practicing it were harshly punished. After abolition, the oppression

and subjugation of the Afro-Brazilian population continued: capoeira, practiced mostly by former slaves, was declared illegal in 1890 (Soares 2001: 39-40). The punishment for the practice of capoeira, also called *vadiagem*<sup>4</sup> (vagrancy), ranged from three months of forced labor to 300 lashes, imprisonment or death (Soares 2001: 112-123). It wasn't until the 1930s that capoeira became legal (Pires 2004: 41-42). Capoeira was taken out of the streets and housed in 'respectable' physical culture centers, where capoeira was reshaped to cater to the white elite. During this transformation, its African elements were purposefully downplayed and stripped away. *Capoeira Mestres* (master teachers) began teaching a form of capoeira that was less ambiguous about its nature — a form that was shaped more like a sport, with tournaments, uniforms and belt systems — giving in to a Western, if Asian influenced, classification. This new form, which borrowed elements from Asian martial arts, physical education and gymnastics went as far as omitting the word capoeira, calling itself *luta regional bahiana*, or regional fight from Bahia (Abib 2004: 117). Capoeira was presented as local, regional and Brazilian: no mention of Africa. The descendant of this hybrid form has spread throughout Brazil and the world, and is known today as *capoeira regional*.

Since the early 1980s, young capoeira *mestres* from the lineage of Mestre Pastinha and his two legendary living disciples, Mestre João Grande and Mestre João Pequeno, began a movement to take capoeira angola out of obscurity (where it had remained during the boom of capoeira regional) and restore its African origins. This politicized group of *capoeiristas*, who call themselves *angoleiros*, strive today to keep capoeira true to what are considered its original values and traditions, from the structure of the *rodas* (the name of the events where capoeira is played which also refers to its circular shape), to the movement choices and the closeness of the game. This genre not only maintains the word capoeira in its name, it also includes the word *angola*, a direct geographical reference to Africa.

*Angoleiros* and *angoleiras*<sup>5</sup> believe that the origins of capoeira can be traced back to a dance from the Congo region called the *n'golo*, or Zebra Dance. Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares describes this dance in *A negregada instituição* (1994), basing his description on the widely-disseminated account of this dance by the Portuguese traveler Albano Neves de Souza, who,

... in the early 1960s, recorded an initiation ceremonial dance in Angola, practiced among groups of the Mocupe and Mulundo regions, present-day Southern Angola. Taking place during the *múfico* celebrations, a puberty rite of the young women of the group, it is done inside a large circle of people of the tribe, who clap and set the rhythm. Inside the circle, two young men execute the dance of the zebra, or *n'golo*, in which, imitating the movement of these animals, they try to hit the face of their opponent with their feet (Soares 1994: 24; my translation).<sup>6</sup>

The extent to which capoeira angola is directly derived from the *n'golo* is open to debate, but it is widely believed in the capoeira angola world that the *n'golo* was the *seed of the game from angola*, which was brought from Africa to Brazil. This belief is expressed in the name of the capoeira group where I conducted my recent research: the *Grupo Semente do Jogo de Angola* (Seed of the Game from Angola Group), led by Mestre Jogo de Dentro.

### Fighting the System: *Capoeira Angola's* Resistance

"Dá, dá, dá no nego  
 No nego você não dá"  
 Hit hit hit the black man  
 The black man you won't hit

The resistance element is, and has been, an intrinsic part of the capoeira ideology. Resistance is the core element of the widespread myth of the origins of capoeira as a means to escape slavery in the plantations of colonial Brazil, and as a form of defending runaway slave communities called *quilombos*. In this version of its early history, capoeira provided the resistance that resulted in physical freedom from the brutal and oppressive system of slavery. Although this hypothesis is discredited today by leading Brazilian capoeira scholar Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, who attributes its birth to an anonymous article published in 1925 in a magazine called *Vida Policial* (Soares 2001: 42), it is worthy of mention here because it exemplifies capoeira's association with resistance to oppression.

The concept of resistance is central to capoeira angola (Abib 2004: 38). On my capoeira angola practice T-shirt it reads "*Angola capoeira mãe — dez anos de resistência*" (Angola capoeira mother — ten years of resistance). An *angoleiro* who I met in Bahia has the phrase "*Eu odeio o sistema*" (I hate the system) tattooed on his forearm. Contemporary imagery of capoeira angola includes references to slavery — such as the ubiquitous broken chain present in many capoeira T-shirts, posters and brochures — and many songs reference resistance to slavery in their lyrics. These references make a 500-year-old struggle contemporary, namely, the Afro-Brazilian struggle against oppression, injustice and inequality.

Pedro Abib (2004: 117-118), discussing the work of Leticia Reis (2000), points out that capoeira can be seen as a "metaphor of social struggle," where, alternating between "active and passive resistance," the capoeiristas negotiate power during the game. *Angoleiros/as* avoid direct contact and confrontation and prefer setting traps so that one's opponent may find him/herself off balance or twisted into a knot, facing the wrong direction or unable to counter-attack. Both players fluidly weave in and out of each other's spaces waiting for a brief moment of distraction, looking for an opening, trying to take advantage of each other's weaknesses. Strategy is much more important than strength. The indirect nature of the confrontation during the capoeira game can be seen as a physical manifestation of the socio-political resistance of *angoleiros/as*, who come in large part from the lower socio-economic strata of Brazilian society, often Afro-Brazilians (*Afro-descendentes*), or non-Afro-Brazilians who sympathize with the *Afro-descendente* struggle against racism and inequality. Capoeira regional, with its high kicks, flashy acrobatics and codified take-down techniques is often looked down upon in capoeira angola circles. It is a form of capoeira that has been tamed, altered and manipulated to fulfill hegemonic classifications and aesthetic preferences for acrobatic virtuosity, its uncomfortable (and potentially threatening) element of socio-political resistance conveniently stripped away.

Through its physical manifestation, capoeira angola's resistance is cultural, racial, political and social. Today's politicized *angoleiros/as* oppose an unjust socio-economic system by creating an environment of alternative values — values rooted in a tradition that is both old and new, both African and Brazilian — a tradition that teaches respect, fairness and above all, non-violence. They strive to create a counter-culture where socio-economic class, skin color, nationality and gender, which are markers of otherness and sources of discrimination in the outside world, are not markers at all.

### Serious Play and Playful Seriousness: Embracing the Conflict

"O sim sim sim  
 O não não não"  
 Oh, yes yes yes  
 Oh no no no

Two *angoleiros/as* touch hands and smile at each other before entering the *roda*, and play against (but simultaneously with) each other surrounded by their community, fellow *angoleiros/as*, who sit in a circle defining the small space where the game takes place. The two players look for each other's openings and try to take control of that space, sometimes with a head, sometimes with a leg, and other times with their whole bodies. The *angoleiro/a's* support constantly alternates between the hands and the feet, and sometimes the head momentarily bears the weight during an *au de cabeça* (a head cartwheel). To an outsider, these fluid, interweaving bodies might look like two dancers in an improvisation jam, but the *capoeirista* knows that each time these open spaces are filled, the intention goes beyond a spatially complementary gesture. Each movement is an attack that is never completed — in capoeira angola, blows are 'shown' rather than fully delivered. Each 'attack' is answered by an evasive move: the players alternately duck in *negativas* to avoid leg sweeps (a *rabo de arraia* or *meia-lua-de-frente*) or carefully stop a head butt (*cabeçada*) just before it makes contact. Both players know, however, that this seemingly harmless game could turn dangerous or even deadly. Although only 'shown,' every move carries a real violent potential — a potential that is tightly controlled by the strict rules of non-violence that govern capoeira angola.

The game of capoeira angola embodies Africanity by, literally and symbolically embracing conflict. Brenda Dixon Gottschild refers to the Africanist ability of accepting and celebrating conflict and dissonance (rather than trying to resolve it) as "embracing the conflict" — when "paired contraries" are allowed to co-exist, such as "awkward and smooth; detached and threatening; innocent and seductive" (2001: 333).

Capoeira angola is at the same time dangerous and safe, playful and serious, unpredictable and rule-bound. The element of play is evident in the moments when a player calls a *volta ao mundo* (which literally means a turn or stroll around the world). This is a pre-established convention where the two players take a break by walking around the *roda*. On the surface, this is a moment for the players to catch their breaths before starting over, but, at the slightest sign of distraction, the *volta ao mundo* is used as an ambush, an opportunity to 'show' an attack, which is often met with an evasive maneuver and a smile in

acceptance of this momentary defeat. The playful element is also seen when, after being unintentionally touched during the game (but not hurt), a player pretends to be seriously injured, by limping, gesturing to the other player asking for mercy or pointing to the invented injury in mock pain. These two examples underscore the latent danger in the game, but they do so in a playful and friendly way. Danger and safety are allowed to co-exist.

By entering the *roda*, the *angoleiro/a* is choosing to engage in a codified and controlled form of conflict, where the inherent danger in the game is mitigated by rules of conduct that emphasize fairness and non-violence. This danger is both highlighted and eased by humor, an integral part of the angola game. Not only do the players embrace the conflict between danger and safety, seriousness and play, they are also embraced and protected in the *roda* by the other *angoleiros* and *angoleiras*, a community of *camaradas* (literally comrades) who delineate the physical boundaries of the game.

### Contained Danger Inside the Game: *Jogo de dentro*

*"Jogo de dentro, jogo de fora  
valha-me Deus, minha Nossa Senhora"*  
Inside game, outside game  
God and Our Lady protect me

The ability to play with elegance and fluidity, to come dangerously close to the other player and feign vulnerability only to set a trap for a counter-attack, but to be skilled enough to stop a blow millimeters before making contact — this is what makes for good capoeira angola. The capoeira angola game is played close to the ground, weight shifting smoothly from feet to hands, bringing the two players together in a tight game within a small circle.

Among the many physical aspects that set capoeira angola apart from other styles of capoeira is the *jogo de dentro*, or inside game, the moment when the game becomes close and tight, when the two players are so close to each other that one player is said to be playing 'inside' the other. Mestre Jogo de Dentro, who earned his nickname from Mestre João Grande because of his close playing style, defines the *jogo de dentro*:

It is a game close to the ground, where you have to work with balance, endurance and at the same time with a lot of attention — the moment when you are there, 100% there, you cannot lose your concentration. The game is played very close, you don't give any space to your partner, you know when he is making a deliberate move and really paying attention. It's a very special moment for the *capoeirista*, when he starts discovering himself, his game, and when he trips his partner so he can test his partner's knowledge (Mestre Jogo de Dentro 2006: quote from video-recorded interview).

The *jogo de dentro* is the moment when the players are protected by the close proximity of each other, a game that can only exist when the two players trust each other (and themselves) enough to come so close as to become vulnerable. But this is not blind trust, and the *angoleiro/a's* vulnerability is carefully guarded — every opening is a trap and every player must know how to protect himself or herself by constantly counter-attacking. However, a skillful

player knows how to render these attacks and counter-attacks harmless at the last fraction of a second.

The *jogo de dentro* is a series of tightly interwoven near misses — a moving puzzle, where both players try to outsmart each other and test each other's knowledge. An example of these playful traps is when a *rabo de arraia*, a leg sweep which usually forces the other player into a *negativa* (an evasive move that takes the player low to the ground), is immediately followed by another *rabo de arraia* in the opposite direction, breaking the turn-taking pattern of attack and defense. The result is a trapped player, stuck close to the ground staring at the sole of her/his partner's shoe.

The capoeira angola *roda* provides its participants with an environment packed with potential danger, but with a strict code of conduct where the slightest display of hostility could result in temporary or even permanent banishment from a group. In the *jogo de dentro*, danger and safety, trust and deception, create a tangible tension that is admired and prized in capoeira angola.

### The Beauty Inside the Game: *Jogo bonito*

*"Jogo de dentro, jogo de fora  
jogo bonito é esse jogo de Angola"  
Inside game, outside game  
a beautiful game is this game from Angola*

Capoeira angola opposes the Brazilian hegemony not only by creating its own subculture of respect, fairness and justice, where the latent violence of the game is strictly controlled, it opposes the system by establishing its own definition of beauty. In capoeira angola, beauty has nothing to do with skin color, body shape or muscle definition. During classes and *rodas*, muscles are hidden under loose fitting t-shirts and pants, and an untucked shirt is reason to stop the game until the shirt is tucked again. The muscled shirtless capoeirista flying through the air belongs to the world of capoeira regional, not angola.

Mestre Jogo de Dentro explains what constitutes a beautiful game:

*A beautiful game is a calm game, a tranquil game, an elegant game, a game [played] with a smile on your face and at the same time showing your partner ... at the right moment that you're playing a beautiful game but you are aware of everything that's happening around you, without the need to massacre your partner, without pummeling him. You don't hit [the other player]. ... This is the *jogo de dentro* (Mestre Jogo de Dentro 2006: quote from video-recorded interview).*

Beauty in capoeira angola, often paired with the concepts of elegance and tranquility, has to do with how much cunning players are able to show in their game, all the while respecting the rules of non-violence. Physical strength is less important than the mental prowess of constantly creating traps for the other player and stopping a kick or head butt just before it makes contact. Often the term *jogo bonito* (beautiful game) is used to describe the *jogo de dentro*, and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

The beautiful game embodies both threat and trust — embracing the conflict. The game is beautiful when the threat of violence can be ‘acted out’ without being real. The observers can enjoy the aesthetic experience without fearing for the safety of their *camadaras*. In the counter-culture of capoeira angola, beauty is not an external attribute imposed by the media, but it is reclaimed and redefined as the ability to engage in an elegant and fair physical dialogue while smiling.

### Conclusion

“Adeus adeus  
Boa viagem  
Eu vou m’embora  
Boa viagem”  
Goodbye, goodbye  
Have a nice trip  
I’m leaving now  
have a nice trip

Capoeira angola defies hegemony in many ways, beginning with its unwillingness to submit to Western classifications of dance, theater, sport or martial arts. It reclaims the Africanity that was stripped away during the rise of capoeira regional. Resistance to an oppressive system is central to the capoeira angola ideology, where references to slavery and Africa serve as a way to celebrate African heritage in a society where Africanity is often feared and marginalized.

*Angoleiros* have created an environment where opposites are allowed to co-exist, and conflict is embraced: threat and trust are not mutually exclusive and closeness can mean both protection and vulnerability in the *jogo de dentro*. The goal of the game is not to defeat the other, but to challenge one another through a series of playful traps. In the capoeira angola aesthetic, beauty is redefined and measured in terms of fairness and safety, skill and elegance. *Angoleiros* exercise their peaceful resistance inside the *roda*, in a movement that continues to sow the seeds of the game from Angola in Brazil and further abroad.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These are excerpts of capoeira songs (in public domain) that I sang when I presented a shorter version of this paper at the 29<sup>th</sup> Society of Dance History Scholars Conference in Banff, Canada, in June 2006.

<sup>2</sup> I attended classes and participated in *rodas* from August 2005 until April 2006 at the *Grupo Semente do Jogo de Angola* in Barão Geraldo, Brazil. I also attended the Second International Encounter of Capoeira Angola in Salvador, Bahia.

<sup>3</sup> Law 3,353 of May 13, 1888, signed by Imperial Princess Regent Isabel, daughter of Emperor Dom Pedro II, the last emperor of Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> The -eiro or -eira endings in Portuguese refer to a person who does or makes something. The -o is the masculine ending and the -a the feminine. *Angolano/a* is a person from the country of Angola.

<sup>5</sup> Today, capoeira regional is treated much like a sport in Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> See also Moura (1980) and Almeida (1986) for references to the *n'golo* and descriptions by Neves de Souza.

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