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<http://www.boston-capoeira.com/Mandingueiros/Home.html>

<http://www.anauecapoeira.com/>

My journey into the *roda* began twelve years ago in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. It was there that I first saw what the physical expression of *capoeira* was, in the form of a *roda*. It was a circle of people, two of them holding percussive instruments in their hands, one familiar, a tambourine (*pandeiro*) ...the other was foreign in appearance. This bow like instrument (*berimbau*) emitted a particular tone, one that seemed to come from the depths of the soul. The people within the circle moved close to the ground at a steady pace and carried a symbolic energy, a playful essence and the very cadence of the rhythm being played on the *berimbau* and *pandeiro*. They dodged each other's skillful attacks and at times seemed to move altogether ignoring the other person, but suddenly out of nowhere one of them would make a move that threw his "partner" off balance. The game finished with one individual laughing on the floor and the rest of the circle laughing with him. It would take another 6 months before I would enter such a *roda* myself.

Eleven years ago I traveled to Sarasota, Florida to begin my studies in Illustration and, it turned out, to begin my entry into the *roda* of *capoeira*. It was there that I met *Mestre Rony* (Master Rony) from the group *Capoeira Volta ao Mundo* and through him countless other masters of the art of *capoeira*. M. *Rony* is a short, athletic man from the small town of *Pirassununga* in the state of *São Paulo*, Brazil. He was my first teacher and for the first four years of my *capoeira* journey, he instructed me about the rituals, history, and

culture of the art form. His students were fluid players of the game, with a deep knowledge of the music and a polished way of playing. Acrobatic feats were accomplished with ease, and they were able to quickly switch from seeming aloof to appearing like disciplined martial artists. There was something driving them, a force, something that I wanted to be a part of. In time this came to me through the voice of the *berimbau*. I remember the feeling of approaching the basketball court where we trained, hearing the sound of the music of *capoeira* come closer with every step. Classes at that time took place outside on a public basketball court with a dim lamp post as the only light source. It was a thirty minute walk to the court but once I found myself within reach of the sound of the *berimbau* I would feel my pulse begin to race. Its sounds penetrated somewhere deep into my soul, conjuring up experiences perhaps long forgotten. Richard P. Graham and N. Scott Robinson state at Robinson's website:

This instrument is a gourd-resonated, braced musical bow of African origin. The *berimbau* originated in an early nineteenth-century Brazilian slave culture. Sometime in the late nineteenth century, this new musical bow received a Lusophone name — *berimbau de barriga*, or "jaw harp of the stomach"— and entered a new cultural context, the African-Brazilian martial art form known as *capoeira* (Kubik 1979, 30-33).<sup>1</sup>

As a Caribbean islander with paternal roots in one of Colombia's center of Afro-Latin culture, this expression Afro-Brazilian culture in *capoeira* felt natural. It was the music that first stung me and injected me with its characteristic cadence and sound. It was not polished, not entirely concentrated on performance, but the music was nonetheless essential to the spirit of the game itself. It is the driving force for the game and sets the tone for the conversation, influencing it both through rhythm and suggestions given by the leader of the *bateria*, or *capoeira* orchestra. The instruments that comprise this orchestra are three *berimbaus* (musical bows), two *pandeiros* (tambourines), one *atabaque* (a tall, narrow, single-headed drum with African antecedents and a resemblance to Cuban conga drums), one *agogô* (bi-tonal iron gong or bell from the Yoruba of Africa) and a *reco-reco* (a wooden scrapper). The structure of the music of *capoeira* is one of its most ritualized elements and resembles the diverse influences that have taken part in the re-definition of this conceptual framework in Brazil.

When I was studying at M. Rony's academy, as well as countless other experiences during my first years of studying the art I would come to understand that *capoeira* was much more than a martial art. Though its most salient feature, martial-acrobatic arts often serve to obfuscate the delicate interaction that takes place between all elements of the *roda*, a convergence of all the elements of this art in a performance-like ritual. *Capoeira* scholar Ken Dossar observes:

"The object of the game is for the capoeiristas to use finesse, guile, and technique to maneuver one another into a defenseless position, rendering them open to a blow, kick or sweep."<sup>2</sup>

In time I understood that the two main elements that drive the game of *capoeira*, two elements that are implicit in the game are *mandinga* and *axé*. *Mandinga* is translated in the *Aurelio* dictionary as a "magic" or "spell". Within the context of *capoeira* it means

amongst many different things, the hidden power that one possesses that enables one to disguise one's true intention and to trick their opponent, akin to hypnotizing him/her into a trance-like state so that they can't unravel the web that you weave around them. It is the way in which people express or explain a *capoeirista's* ability to be expressive and embellish their game with transcendent gestures.<sup>3</sup> As Niyi Afolabi takes the following approach to defining *axé*, it begins with how Afro-Brazilians:

'depend on a central source for their productive energy and cultural resistance...“vital force”. In Yoruba (*axé = áse*), it simply means, “may it come to pass” or “so be it”. *Áse* triggers action, it influences reality, it invokes as it provokes, it makes things happen.' <sup>4</sup>

In the context of *capoeira* it also explores the meaning of a message of peace, as in the Islamic use of “*As-Salaam-Alaikum*” where it serves as a greeting, a prayer for blessings and an expression of brotherhood.

Throughout the years my understanding of the art of *capoeira* has deepened and with each bit of information my experience makes me aware of all there is yet to learn. The diversity of emphasis on the different elements of the art came to light or me through the different groups I've had a pleasure of training with. Though I've only been a member of two main groups, my travels have allowed me to train with a wide variety of Masters of the art. Each of these has a particular focus in their academy, taking at least three of the main elements of the art and dedicating the majority of their training time to these. Whether it is acrobatic skills, martial arts expertise, dance expression, ritual knowledge, theatrical expression or musical performance each of them approached *capoeira* with a relentless pursuit of something greater than the art itself. These diverse experiences allowed me to see the art as a culture, a way to see the world and think of life as a whole.

The two most influential members of my learning journey regarding my approach to movement to date have been *Contra-Mestre Jô* and *ProfessorEsporão*. An icon in the art and respected throughout the world as a Master of technical excellence (*Contra-Mestre Jô*), the 3 years I spent under her tutelage in New York City (NYC) served to inform my sense of the importance of finesse in the game. Training with her was always both exciting and demanding. My journey in NYC took me deeper into the movements of *capoeira* as well as into the complexity of the game. It was a time of growth and exchange that propelled my understanding of the dance-martial art element of the art forward. This period eventually ended with my return to the island of Puerto Rico, where it had all started and to reunite with my longtime friend and teacher *ProfessorEsporão*. His influence blended well with that of *Contra-Mestre Jô* due to his emphasis on technical prowess. Training was grueling, with three to four hours of training six days a week, on almost all the elements of the art, particularly attention to detail in movement, expression, music, and gesture. It was at this school that my understanding of the complexity of the art became clear. *Vicente Ferreira de Pastinha* known as *Mestre Pastinha*, the father of *capoeira angola* as we understand it, when asked what *capoiera* was, replied “It is everything the mouth eats.” It was with *ProfessorEsporão* that I was able to begin to understand this.

Twelve years after my initial experience of a *roda*, and now at the stage of *estágio*, my understanding of *capoeira* has made me aware of its vastness, of its depth and resilience to definition. I am currently living in Cambridge, Massachusetts and have the privilege of experiencing a new chapter in my journey. As an *estagiario* I have the responsibility of expanding my understanding of all aspects of *capoeira* as well as serving for the greater good of the art. A main feature of this period in my training is a requirement to teach. I have journeyed to four states and six countries to teach workshops, seminars, courses, and to serve as an intern at various schools. Over the past two years I've trained as part of my *estágio* under the tutelage of *Mestre Chuvisco*, one of *capoeira's* treasures. His philosophy resonates with that of my previous teachers and serves to deepen my understanding of the art. He is a well-versed Master, one who comprehends principles long forgotten by many younger *capoeiristas* and hence missing from the journey of many. A native of the state of *Minas Gerais*, Brazil, he has carried with him a deep respect for the art and the traditions that inform it. With him my knowledge of the *fundamentos* (basis/essence) of the art has taken a new turn.

I'm excited to share *capoeira* with you and to open the possibility for it to touch you and ignite your passion as it has mine. Together with the other members of the Boston *Capoeira* group, *Mandingueiros dos Palmares*, we will perform on the First Thursday of August, 8/6, starting at 7:00 pm, in JP Concerts, at St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke and Revere, Jamaica Plain. For more information about JP Concerts and directions please see: [www.jpconcerts.org](http://www.jpconcerts.org) THIS EVENT IS FREE AND FAMILY FRIENDLY.

1 Statements about the *berimbau* taken from <http://www.nscottrobinson.com/berimbau.php>

2 Statements about the game of *capoeira* from Ken Dossar taken from [http://www.joaogrande.org/capoeira\\_angola.htm](http://www.joaogrande.org/capoeira_angola.htm)

3 Statements regarding *mandinga* taken from <http://www.mandinga.org/mandinga.html>

4 Statements regarding *axé* taken from *Frangments of Bone: African Religions in a New World*, edited by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, chapter 6, by Niyi Afolabi, pag. 108

Links:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEWxfBuAww4> M. Rony and P. *Esporão*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hz5sfV6kfYY> C.M. *Jô*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FGF4JVQ68A&feature=related> M. *Chuvisco* and his group