

## Capoeira

Brazilian culture is a mixture of the influences, religions, and traditions of the three major ethnic groups that make up their society. In the sixteenth century, Brazil became a major Portuguese colony. Throughout the seventeenth century the Portuguese presence grew stronger. Native females served the Portuguese as sexual partners, and these relationships gave rise to a sizeable number of *mamelucos* or *caboclos*, mixed-blood offspring with European fathers and indigenous mothers (Schneider 36). The native people could easily escape enslavement from the Portuguese, because of their ability to survive in Brazil's environment (Schneider 36). This led to importation of African slaves, already common in Portugal, totaling 250,000 by 1650 and exceeding 600,000 by the end of the century. Thus, the three major components of the future Brazilian society, native, Caucasian, and African, were present and mixing through widespread miscegenation.

The religions brought to Brazil by the Portuguese and African slaves had the largest influence in folk dance and music. When Brazil became a colony the Portuguese strictly enforced the Catholic faith. Therefore, the native people and the African slaves had to find a way to combine this religion and their native cultures. On Sundays and Christian holidays the slaves danced in the streets and squares with the permission of their owners (Schneider 40). However, there are many other ways these religions influenced dance.

When Roman Catholic missionaries were sent to convert Brazil, they spread their influences throughout the country. The missionaries put on religious plays, which dealt with spiritual meanings from Africa, but were also impacted by the faith of the

Portuguese. The Roman Catholics also had processions, festivals and folkloric appearances, which are accompanied by songs, dances, and chants (Marks 525).

A second religious influence was the Kongo-Angolans, who were from Portuguese West Africa. The Kongo-Angolans formed religious brotherhoods called *Irmandades*. They worshipped black Catholic saints and the Virgin. Their ceremonies were composed of music and choreographed dances. The Kongo-Angolans held an annual coronation of a King and Queen, which contained dances such as the *Congadas*. The final part of the *Congada* was danced in honor of the Virgin of the Rosary, and hence was a celebration of the triumph of Christ (Marks 526). There are many other celebrations of the Kongo-Angolans, such as the Day of Kings on January 6. Other celebrations following are Saints Day, and the Epiphany. These celebrations have modernized into what is known as the Carnival, which contains instruments, music, choreographed dances, and positional movement of circles and lines.

A third religion that was influential was Afro-Brazilian cults. They worshipped a mixture of traditional Roman Catholic saints such as Virgin Immaculate Conception celebrated on December 8, and that of gods of nature such as Forest and Hunt whom are celebrated on Jan 20, and known St. Sebastian's Day. These celebrations are combinations of chants and rhythms. They may take place outdoors or in a sacred room. An example of such a cult is the *Candomble*, which is Yoruba-based, originating in Nigeria, Benin Republic. Their ceremony is a sacrifice in morning, festival dancing of *batuques*, praising the gods. The people of the *Candomble* believed that by the end of the ceremony the gods appeared from the heavens and were open for wishes of the cult (Marks 256).

One way of visualizing a specific Brazilian dance and how it affects the culture is by focusing on Capoeira. Capoeira is a holistic art form. It encompasses everything from music and philosophy to self-defense. Culture and history has shaped this art form and in return Capoeira has shaped the lives of Brazilians.

One aspect of Capoeira is the Jogo, or the game. Players refer to this mixture of dance, martial arts, and acrobatics as a game partly because of the circumstances under which it was developed. Traditional fellow Capoeirists stand in a circle and two players perform in the middle. This circle is called a roda. The musicians stand at the head of the roda and create a rhythm and style of capoeira for the players. Two players will enter to the center and perform a sequence of moves towards each other for the appearance of a fight. There are 230 moves, which include kicks, jumps, blocks, weaves and flips. However, new moves are being created constantly. Most often the Mestre is the leader of the roda playing on the Berimbau, which is a musical instrument made with a gourd resonator and a single steel wire stretched across a long pole or stick. It is the dominant instrument of Capoeira (Zogiab).

Like the history of dance or anything that was not adequately recorded during an important period of time, it is hard to pinpoint the origins of capoeira. What is known is that this form of dance originated with the Africans that were slaves in Brazil. The ethno-cultural contribution from the massive amount of those enslaved is nearly immeasurable. When looking at the music, movement, and accounts of participators it is easy to say that Capoeira had deep roots in Africa or at least the African slaves of Brazil. The vastness of Africa's contribution to Brazil and Capoeira is said well by Bira

Almeida, “We know for sure that the largest cultural river that flooded Brazil ran from Africa, but the sources of its tributaries are still hidden” (Almeida 2).

There are many different theories on how Capoeira came together. One theory is that development was by slaves in the rural areas of Brazil. The combat element is used as evidence for this theory. It is believed by many like, Augusto Ferreira, that slaves were practicing for the day they would need to fight their masters if they ever tried to escape (Almeida 4). Another argument would be the thought that the reason that there are no separated arm movements used in capoeira is because of the shackles placed on slaves’ wrists. This argument could slide both ways and may also support the second theory; that slaves created the Capoeira in the cities and urban areas. Brasil Gerson, in History of Rio de Janeiro’s Streets, gives us this reasoning. He says that in the open air markets the slaves would come and carry baskets of birds called capoeiras. In their free time, at these markets, the slaves would play games, one being what is known today as Capoeira. People naturally associate something new with something they already know; thus the slaves who preformed this game used the name Capoeira and it stuck (Almeida 3).

Shortly before Brazil became a republic, Capoeira had the bad image of being seen as street fighting rather than an art form. It was used by the poor and escaped slaves as a way to survive on the streets (Zogaib; Almeida 6). Capoeira gained some respect in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1987, Princess Isabel supported and signed the “Golden Law” that abolished slavery in Brazil. A year later the unsuccessful monarchy could no longer hold on to power. During the shift to a republican government the Black Guard protected Princess Isabel. These newly freed slaves were exceptionally devoted to Isabel because of the Golden Law. These guards used capoeira moves as a fighting

technique to defend the Princess. Problems arose once again for capoeira when the newly formed republic vowed to extinguish its practice. Capoeira was officially outlawed in 1890 and sentencing to participants was imprisonment for two to six months. This turmoil lasted until 1920, but not all was lost (Almeida 5). During this time rhythms, lyrics, movements, and theatrics were cemented into the game. This was achieved by those who would practice capoeira in their homes rather than on the streets. This is where the two major styles of capoeira distinguished themselves (Zogiab).

Music also plays a significant role in the beginning of the definition of Capoeira. Many instruments add to the dynamics of the music. Some popular instruments are the atabaque, conga drum, tambourine, and the most important, a bowed instrument called the berimbau. The berimbau is considered the soul of Capoeira and comes in many sizes. The rhythms produced by the berimbau call for the speed and power of the game (Zogaib).

One rhythm is called Sao Bento Grande de Regional. This was developed by Mestre Bimba who also opened the first legal school of capoeira. When played the capoeira game becomes fast paced, demanding, and powerful. The players will use high kicks and many acrobatic moves to intimidate the other player. Of course real capoeiristas never intend on hurting their partners, but to onlookers this tempo can appear to be dangerous (Almeida 6).

A slower and more precise rhythm, developed by Mestre Pastinha, is the Sao Bento Grande de Angola. Players use low to the ground moves and often try to trick each other and throw them off their momentum. This type of game can be more dangerous, as

some say that becoming hot headed and hostile is easier with its malice characteristics because each player has to keep momentum (Almeida 7).

Singing and clapping are also ways to create an appealing environment for a roda. A Mestre can begin a song that reflects the type of game he would like to see. If a game begins to get out of control or players lose their temper the Mestre will change the song to send a message to the players to calm down and regain their composure (Zogiab).

Today capoeira is hugely popular and affects many aspects of Brazilian life with almost one million participants. Capoeira is the only surviving form of defense from the Americas. It has spread worldwide success in many countries, namely, South Africa, United States, Peru, and Australia. Capoeira clubs and groups perform an annual show and also a roda on every Friday. There is even talk about adding Capoeira as an Olympic sport.

Within this culture dance and music thrived and became an intricate part of Brazilian life. In return, dance too affects society in many ways. Today, Brazilian dance and music has a strong influence on South America and the rest of the world. Pedro Zogiab says it well; "It keeps the Brazilian history and culture alive."

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