

Capoeira

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Brief Overview/Basic Philosophy:

What do you get when you mix dance, acrobatics, music, and martial arts? You get capoeira, the Brazilian martial art known for its rhythm and flow almost as much as it is for its effective kicks, punches, and defensive movements. Trickery is ever present in capoeira, as it has hidden in plain sight for centuries. Born from poverty and servitude, this martial art is now practiced by capoeiristas on every continent the world over.

History and Origins:

Although documentation is sparse, capoeira is believed to have had its genesis with the beginnings of the African slave trade to the Portuguese colony of Brazil in the 1600's. Large sugar cane farms called *engenhos* needed cheap labor, and the need was met by populating these farms with African slaves. As the conditions for slaves were harsh and primitive and the prospect of rebellion was slim due to the strictness of colonial law and the mix of African cultures, individual escape was the sole method available to a slave who hoped for a better living condition. However, fleeing from captivity meant evading the *capitães-do-mato*, the individuals who were in charge of recapturing escaped slaves. Armed and on horseback, the successful escapee had to have the skill to defend himself from such pursuers.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and, due to the obvious inability for chattel slaves to make and keep detailed records of such things (not to mention the hazard of them being discovered by their masters), she is the only undisputed founder of the art. Historians have variously claimed different degrees of African, Native American, and Brazilian influence in the birth of the art. Even the origin of the name is unclear, but the most widely accepted theory is that it comes from the indigenous Tupi language, combining the terms *ka'a* ("jungle") *e pûer* ("it was"), meaning the low-vegetation areas where escaped slaves would hide.

In the earliest days of slavery in Brazil, slaves were often referred to as "black people from Angola," even if the particular slave in question was from some African country other than Angola. As what would later become capoeira was played by those people ostensibly from Angola, the activity came to be called "playing Angola." The name accompanied capoeira down to the present day, and the style considered to most closely resemble the capoeira played in the earliest days of Brazilian slavery is called Capoeira Angola.

In order to resist capture and for mutual benefit, escaped slaves would often come together and form communities called *quilombos* in nearly inaccessible areas. Capoeira continued to be practiced in the *quilombos*, but the focus of the art shifted from individual one-on-one fighting to fighting opposing soldiers in war. The art attained a high degree of refinement as the *quilombos* fought off decades of organized attacks from Portuguese soldiers. Many *quilombos* warriors were so skilled at capoeira that it required more than one dragoon to subdue him.

Brazil became more urbanized at the turn of the 19th Century, and capoeira began to be practiced in the city. However, the danger of a slave able to defend himself against his master and the

state was more than sufficient grounds for the practice of capoeira to be prohibited. This simply drove the practice underground, and many capoeiristas were punished and frequently tortured and/or mutilated by the police for the offense.

Repression of capoeira was in decline in the 1920's when Manoel dos Reis Machado, more popularly known as Mestre Bimba, began working to legitimize and formalize the art. He convinced the governor of Bahia to legalize capoeira in 1928 and opened his own school four years later. Still considered a lower-class pursuit, Mestre Bimba changed the popular image of capoeira by instituting uniforms, proficiency tests, and discipline, among other reforms. These changes later became recognized as a new style of capoeira and was named Capoeira Regional. This helped it gain appeal among the upper classes and secured the art a place in broader Brazilian culture.

With the game of capoeira now fully legitimized, new practitioners began to innovate and experiment with capoeira, often mixing aspects of Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional. These new hybrid styles came to be known as Capoeira Contemporânea, and, though not recognized as a style in its own right, is considered by many to be a sub-style of capoeira.

Training and Techniques:

The *ginga* is the fundamental move from where all other moves are staged. It is a kind of back-and-forth, side-to-side step done in a crouch. This achieves the dual purposes of keeping the capoeirista a moving target for his opponent, and as an easy way to execute fakes or feigned attacking moves.

From the *ginga*, the typical attack in capoeira is from the legs, such as a kick or a sweep. More skilled and experienced capoeiristas can add spinning or jumping kicks to their attack repertoire. Also common is the *tesoura* (“scissors”), which is a takedown executed by wrapping one’s legs around his opponent and twisting him to the ground.

Hand strikes are less common in capoeira, as the assumption is that the capoeirista’s hands may be unavailable as a weapon due to chains or shackles. However, *Jogo de Braços* (“the game of the arm and hand”) is a part of certain disciplines, and it includes punches, knife-hand strikes, eye gouges, and so on.

Defensive movements in capoeira are strongly geared towards avoidance and not blocking. These defensive moves, called *esquivas*, are intended to make it easier to execute counter-attacks and to face multiple opponents at once.

Capoeira is usually practiced in a *roda*, which is a circle of capoeirista. The *roda* is led by a musician playing a *berimbau* (an African stringed instrument), with the capoeirista clapping and singing when not in the middle facing off against another participant. A *roda* for advancing a student to a higher level is called a *batizado* (baptism), and the candidate faces his teacher or a higher level student and demonstrates his competence for advancement. A capoeirista can also acquire his *apelido* (nickname) at a *batizado*. Although no longer strictly necessary, *apelido* harken back to a time before capoeira was legal and a pseudonym was very useful in helping capoeirista avoid capture if a member of his *roda* was arrested and interrogated by the authorities.

Uniforms and Rankings:

Because of the informal roots of capoeira, there is no uniform ranking system. The most common form by *roda* that use a ranking system is colored *corda*, and the most common color progression is taken from the colors of the Brazilian flag – green, yellow, blue, and white.

There is also no official uniform. To the extent that there is a customary dress, the all-white scheme instituted by Mestre Bimba tends to be dominant. Capoeirista often wear *abadas*, which are a kind of stretchy, wide-legged pants, often with the logo of the capoeirista's school.

Terms and Teachings:

Because of the historically decentralized nature of capoeira, many terms are used by different *roda* for different techniques. The following is a list of terms with the most commonly accepted meanings.

Asfixiante – straight punch

Banda – sweep kick

Cabeçada – head butt

Cadeira – a position similar to what is known in other arts as a “horse stance” with the arms protecting the head and torso.

Cocorinha – defensive move, basically a squat with the knees to the chest, one arm protecting the head and the other out for support.

Cotovelada – elbow strike

Escorpião – a scorpion kick; kicking backwards over the head at a target in front of the kicker.

Esquiva – a set of defensive moves for avoiding attack by moving with it, rather than blocking or moving in some other way against the attack.

Ginga – the back-and-forth dancing motion from which all offensive and defensive movements are launched.

Meia-Lua de compass – literally “compass kick”; a kick begun by placing the hands on the ground and swinging the back leg around like a crescent kick. Often called “the king of kicks,” it can be used by masters to judge the overall skill and proficiency of a particular capoeirista.

Ponteira – front snap kick

FAQ's:

Do I need to be able to speak Portuguese to learn capoeira? Although many of the terms are in Portuguese, most instructors speak in the native language of their school.

Do I need a uniform? It depends upon the school and the master, but most schools only require white *abadas* and a white T-shirt.

Will I get injured playing capoeira? Injury is possible, but most injuries occur from performing capoeira moves, not from being struck by other capoeiristas. Full contact sparring in capoeira is not common.

Do I need to be in shape or flexible already to play capoeira? Most people can achieve the flexibility and conditioning required if they are already in average shape. No special amount of flexibility or conditioning is required to begin capoeira.

Organizations dedicated to the Style:

World Capoeira Federation - <http://www.world-capoeira.com/> - world capoeira organization that holds biennial World and European Championship tournaments

Associação Brasileira de Apoio e Desenvolvimento da Arte-Capoeira (ABADÁ-Capoeira) - <http://www.abadacapoeira.com.br/> - largest capoeira foundation dedicated to the spread and development of the art