

Anthropology News

Volume 47

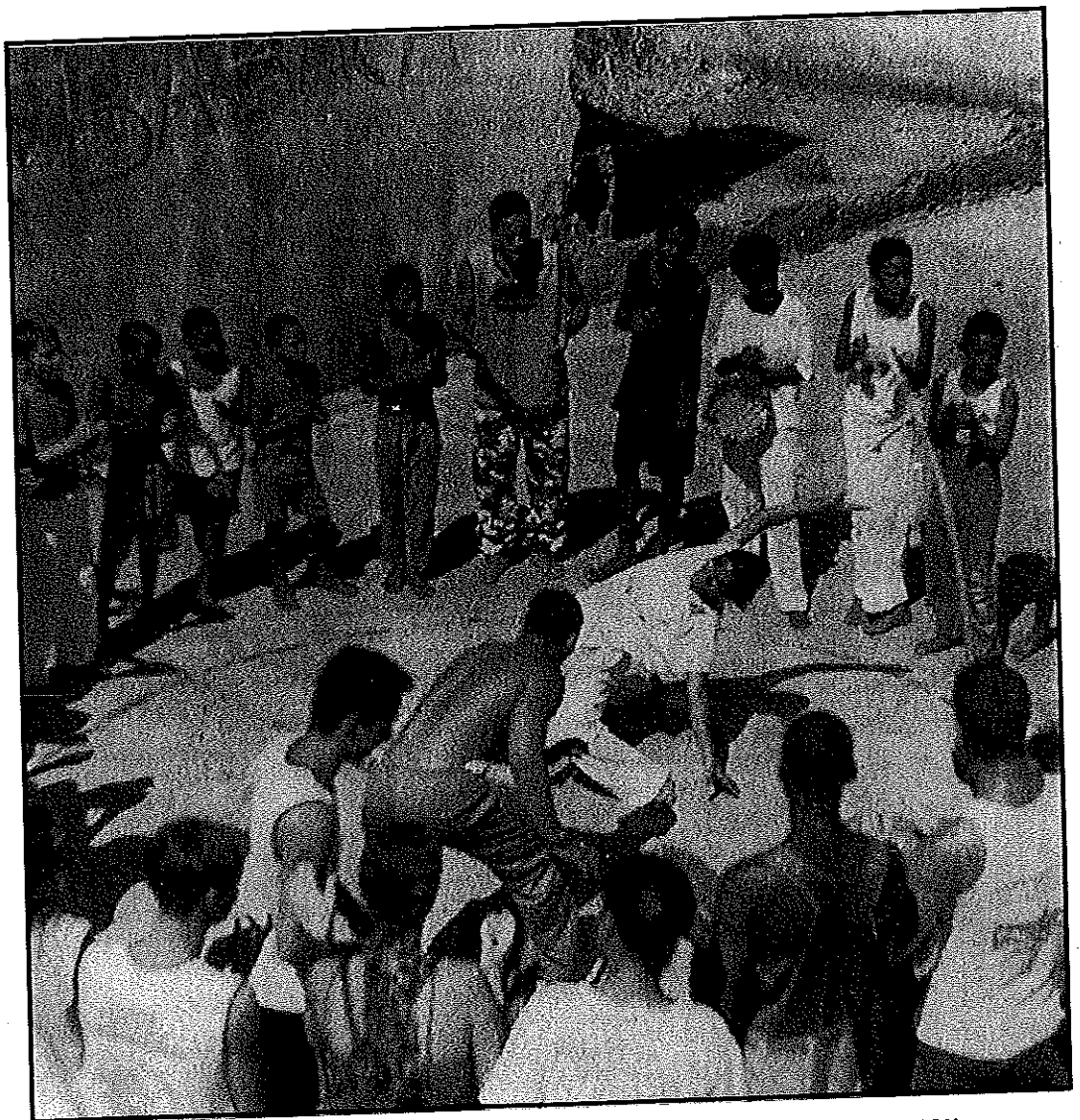
Number 5

May 2006

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION



KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

A Diasporic Practice Goes Back to Africa

KATYA WESOLOWSKI
COLUMBIA U

I weave my way through the youth, taking photographs. Most of them are male and in their early teens, bare-chested and barefooted. Their homemade versions of *abadá*, the stretchy white pants worn by capoeiristas, are held up by bits of rope. Faces fierce with concentration, they follow instructions, moving their bodies through a series of kicks, cartwheels and crouching positions in time to the pounding drum and twanging *berimbau*, a Brazilian musical bow. I hear a giggle from the back of the room and shift my gaze. Children and adults from the surrounding shacks in this poor neighborhood of Luanda, Angola, have slipped in and lined up along the back wall of the cement building to watch the guests from Brazil give a workshop in the Afro-Brazilian martial art, capoeira. Some of the children, only two-, three-, four-years old and dressed in an odd assortment of charity clothes, egg each other on with prods and giggles to mimic the movement and clap their hands in time to the music.



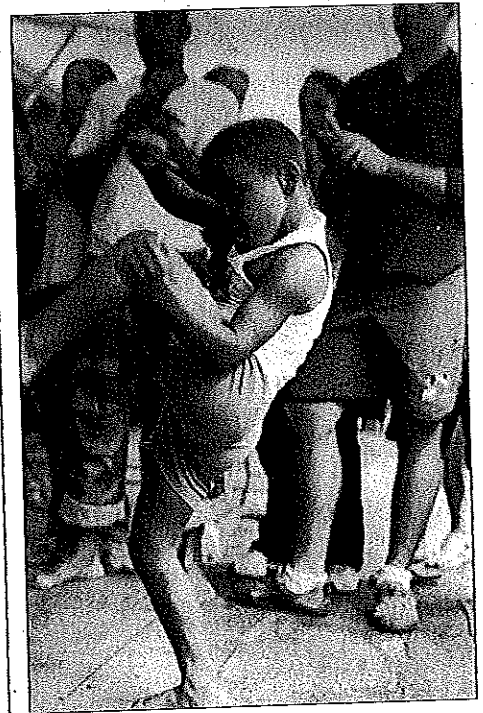
Learning capoeira in Luanda, Angola. Photo courtesy of Katya Wesolowski

Identifying Capoeira

Though the above scene occurred in a "night club" in a poor neighborhood in Luanda, it resonated strongly with what I had been experiencing in samba schools and community centers in *favelas* (shantytowns) in Rio de Janeiro. Traveling to Angola—by far the most extreme detour in my dissertation fieldwork—allowed me to witness the "return" of a diasporic practice to Africa. From 2002–04 I lived in Rio de Janeiro, one of the urban areas in which capoeira, a dynamic mix of fight, dance and acrobatics accompanied by percussive music and singing, developed and continues to flourish.

A paucity of pre-19th century historical evidence has generated mystery—and fierce identity politics—over the exact origins of capoeira. The movement and music contain strong Angolan traits, and most capoeiristas believe it developed from an amalgamation of dance and fight traditions brought by enslaved Bantu-speaking peoples from Angola to Brazil. Once a popular activity among street gangs of disenfranchised young men in Rio de Janeiro, capoeira was outlawed in the city at the end of the 19th century. Yet by the early 20th century, under the populist dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas that promoted a nationalist ideal of "racial democracy" in Brazil, capoeira was celebrated as a component of Brazilian national culture. At the beginning of the 21st century, along with music and samba, capoeira is one of Brazil's chief cultural exports and is quickly gaining recognition as an international sport.

My initial research plan was to settle in one neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro to explore how poor kids learn capoeira, become incorporated into a group and identify as capoeiristas, and how this in turn might affect other aspects of their lives. I soon found myself traveling all over the city—from *favelas* and military barracks to private nursery schools, Ipanema penthouses and the film set of a popular Brazilian soap opera—following the inroads capoeiristas have made in various segments of Brazilian society through teaching and performing. This growing market for capoeira both within and outside of Brazil intensifies the already existing politics among groups over questions of authenticity, history, and practice of capoeira. Yet, it also provides poor youth with new economic and social opportunities, including, for some, the opportunity to travel abroad.



Tourinho (Little Bull), a 6-year-old capoeirista in Rio. Photo courtesy of Katya Wesolowski

Connecting to History

In 2002, a year after I had been in the field, Mestre Camisa, the leader of Abadá-Capoeira, the group with whom I was working most closely, invited me to accompany him and several instructors to Angola. Mestre Camisa spoke of the voyage as a spiritual journey home to the ancestral land of capoeira, which first "returned" to the African continent in 1965. As part of a Brazilian delegation demonstrating African influences on Brazilian culture, famed Bahian teacher, Vicente Ferreira Pastinha then presented it to the First World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar. It is only more recently, however, that capoeira has been introduced to Angola, a country in war from the 1960s to 2002. In 1996, Mestre Camisa took a group of Brazilian capoeiristas to perform in Luanda and Benguela, one of whom stayed on to teach. With the instructor's departure from Luanda after a year, the students, in their teens and early twenties, continued training on their own. Unlike Europe, the US, or Israel, where the popularity of capoeira provides lucrative incentives for Brazilian capoeiristas to immigrate, Angola offers living conditions more difficult than those in Brazil. So that while a constant stream of Brazilian capoeiristas travel to and from Europe, Israel, and the US, far less traffic happens between Angola and Brazil. Mestre Camisa's visit in 2002 was the first in four years for the young members of Abadá-Capoeira in Luanda, who for the most part are self-taught and trained.

I was impressed with the fierce intensity and dedication of the young Angolans engaged in

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Diasporic Practice

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capoeira. They worked hard to imitate the movement and music while simultaneously introducing their own individual styles into the game, composing original songs and creating new moves. They peppered the Brazilian instructors and me with questions about the history and development of capoeira, and organized interviews and presentations at universities and radio stations. A street performance drew hundreds of spectators, many of whom had never seen capoeira, yet eagerly joined the circle, clapping hands, singing and attempting to play. The Angolan capoeiristas described capoeira as reconnecting them to their roots.

Practitioners in France, Japan or Sweden may talk about capoeira as introducing them to Brazilian culture, or to culture from the African diaspora; the Angolans talk about it as a vehicle for recuperating the history and traditions of their own land, devastated by a near half century of war. One of the leaders, a 26-year old woman in a group of mainly young men, explained to me: "Our country experienced a huge identity crisis because of the war. Youth were lost. They did not have anything to identify with, so they were turning to North American rap and reggae and rock, looking for acculturation here and there. And then the rhythm of capoeira—that is already in their blood—calls them, and they see the movement of capoeira, and they hear, 'This is yours; this was born here like you. This is your history.' And so they become more interested and begin to find themselves in capoeira and feel that they have a place in the world."

Developing a Global Network

Besides igniting an interest in their own history and culture, perhaps by recuperating collective memory through movement and music, capoeira connects these Angolan youth to a global network that provides new social and economic avenues. In August of 2005, I returned to Rio de Janeiro for Abadá-Capoeira's World Games, a week of training, fraternizing, and competition. Among the capoeiristas present from countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, was a group of students I had met in Luanda and Benguela, who had obtained sponsorship to attend the conference. While some spoke eagerly of staying in Brazil or travelling to Europe, where others have secured jobs teaching capoeira, others planned to return to Angola to continue developing what they hope will become their own brand of capoeira. ■

Katya Wesolowski (kdw8@columbia.edu) is a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University. She presented a paper based on her Weigner-Gren-funded research at this year's AAA meeting as part of the invited session, "Enduring Inequalities: Violence, Memory, Social Suffering and the Body in Contemporary Latin America."