

## My Experience with Capoeira

(Edward L. Powe, PhD)

I first became aware of the existence of the truly remarkable martial art of Capoeira in 1967 after having received a Fulbright Grant in 1967 to study linguistics in Brazil. I was originally assigned to study in Recife, Pernambuco; but after a short visit to Salvador da Bahia during one of the frequent university strikes, I requested a transfer to the Federal University located in Bahia. The main reason for this request was my initial exposure to Capoeira, in Salvador where I witnessed João Grande (a gigantic student of Mestre Pastinha) spinning around on his head during one of the exhibition matches and his subsequent heading of Raimundo Pequeno who was propelled over the heads of a row of gawking tourists that were seated upon benches.

I was enthralled not only by the beauty of the movements and the captivating rhythms, but also by the fact that this was a Black martial art form said to have had its origins in Angola, Africa. That performance and further contact with the art - first as a student of Mestre Pastinha and then subsequent contact and participation with other groups headed by the late Mestre Caiçara, the late Mestre Bimba, Mestre Gato, Mestre Roque (Pavãozinho, Rio) and the Grupo Senzala from Rio - left a lasting impression which continues to this day. Indeed, I can even credit Capoeira with saving my life on at least two traumatic occasions.

After receiving my Certificado de Capoeirista from Mestre Pastinha in 1968, I formed my own Capoeira group in Washington in 1972 that was composed of some 30 to 50 school children between the ages of 9 and 15. These classes, however, were discontinued in 1974 when I left the country to accept an appointment as Associate Peace Corps Director in Chad.

After several years full of adventure had passed, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin majoring in African Languages and Literature with a specialization in Hausa. Although I applied for a grant to do research for my Ph.D. dissertation on martial arts in Angola, that application was summarily declined. Thus Dr. Kenneth Dossar – a member of the ICAF 2 (International Federation of Capoeira Angola) Board of Directors who wrote his doctoral dissertation dealing with Capoeira was able to beat me to the punch.

I eventually ended up going to Nigeria as a lecturer / researcher in the Department of Nigerian Languages in Kano, Nigeria (1981 – 1983) and, while there, was exposed to a number of fascinating forms of traditional Hausa martial arts including dambe (a kind of one-armed boxing), shanci (wristlet fighting), kokawa (a kind of wrestling), sharo (Fulani stick-flogging), tauri (toughskin competitions), farauta (hunting expeditions), etc. and upon returning to the US, wrote and defended my doctoral dissertation dealing with Hausa Combat Literature (drum calls, recitations, songs) in 1984 and its relationship to sympathetic magic.

Ten years later, I wrote a companion volume to the dissertation entitled Hausa Combat Games . This was the first volume in a series of books dealing with Black Martial Arts. The second book in that series (2001) dealt with Morengy from the Indian Ocean, and the third (but referred to as the fourth) dealt with Northern Nguni Stick-fighting (2002). I had intentionally put off the writing and publication of a book dealing with Capoeira until I had the opportunity to visit Angola - a visit that I argued would have to await the termination of belligerence in the interior of that war-torn nation.

Although my interest in African Martial Arts was very strong (over 8 volumes have now been self-published on this topic excluding capoeira) my love and respect for Capoeira remains supreme. As a result, I eventually decided to publish several books dealing with Capoeira without first going to Angola. These are:

1. [BMA III Part I: Capoeira & Congo \(Color Version, HB\)](#)
2. [BMA III Part I: Capoeira & Congo \(Color Version, SB\)](#)
3. [BMA III Part I: Capoeira & Congo \(B & W Version\)](#)
4. [Capoeira in Mozambique: An Introduction](#)
5. [The ABC and B-A-Ba of Capoeira Angola](#)
6. [Elementos Basicos de Capoeira de Angola \(Color / B&W\)](#)

When I first encountered Capoeira in 1967, there were three philosophical schools in existence: Capoeira Estilizada Sena Vox (founded by Mestre Sena in Bahia); Capoeira Regional (founded by Mestre Bimba in Bahia); and Capoeira Angola which embraced all the other academies including the one formed by Mestre Vicente Pastinha also in Bahia.

Mestre Pastinha when asked what the difference was between the various schools replied “Capoeira e uma so” (Capoeira is one not many). My perception of the differences can be best visualized by a “coffee metaphor”. That is, Capoeira Angola (with a predominance of black practitioners and strict adherence to the old ways) is pure black coffee with no added ingredients; Capoeira Regional (whose practitioners over time were mostly white and whose movements incorporated elements of other combat arts like batuque and wrestling) is coffee with added milk; whereas Capoeira Estilizada (whose practitioners wore judo outfits and belts and bowed to one another rather than executing a queda de rins salute) was coffee with oriental spices. Therefore, Pastinha’s words can be best interpreted as Capoeira (which he affirms is originally from Africa) is basically the same thing “coffee”, although its taste may differ depending on how and where it is served.

Today a fourth form has emerged known as “Capoeira Contemporaneo” which claims to take the best from each form but results in a watered down version of each. Moreover, in recent years Capoeira (and this includes some schools of Capoeira Angola) has been undergoing transformations which are gradually divorcing the art from its African roots - that is there is an increasing tendency to delete all that is African from its various manifestations and as such Capoeira is losing much of the magic which captivated me in 1967.

Once the child of Africa, it has transformed over the years to an Afro-Brazilian then a Brazilian and now a global art with many variations. The once amazing defenses against furious blows coming from all directions has morphed into an acrobatic form of entertainment with fighters not following through with their kicks or kicking from such a distance that they can not possibly strike their opponent.

This was not in vogue when I learned it with Mestre Pastinha who frowned upon unmotivated acrobatics. If you did not avoid the blow with an appropriate defense you were hit. And indeed, when I was actually hit one day with the razor sharp heel of my personal instructor (Getulio), I told him I quit and abruptly left. He informed Mestre Pastinha of my decision and Pastinha replied: “Don’t worry, he’ll be back”. And, after nursing my wound, I did return on the very next day of practice.

In order to preserve the magnificence of this art as I first knew it, our BLAC Foundation

[www.blacfoundation.org](http://www.blacfoundation.org)

has taken on the task of defending both its original form and its pronounced Africanicity. Moreover, through FACA-US (established by Lacour Yancey in 2019) we are also trying to establish a campfire in the US around which all like-minded groups can sit and benefit from the materials which we have already developed as well as those in the pipeline. Those emerging FACA groups can also link with the international groups already established in Timor Leste, Sao Tome, Principe, and Mozambique for which see: [www.blacfoundation.org](http://www.blacfoundation.org)

## FACA

1. [FACA overview](#)
2. [FACA in Sao Tome and Principe](#)
3. [FACA in Mozambique](#)
4. [FACA int the US](#)
5. [FACA in Timor Leste](#)

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