

My Capoeira Regional Pilgrimage

By

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Since my early days of initiation in the world of Capoeira, I dreamed of visiting Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. I became very interested in Bahia through Capoeira songs, books, videos and articles. Although, I started and trained in a contemporary (the idea of playing both Angola and Regional) Capoeira-based group, I always wanted to learn Capoeira Regional as taught by Mestre Bimba. In 1999 and 2000, I was exposed via workshop to a graduated student of Mestre Bimba, Mestre Deputado, who confirmed both through his words and his workshop teachings, that Capoeira Regional was very different from what I was learning and playing (when it came to the “Regional” part of my training). Fast forward to 2012, I was presented with an opportunity to host Mestre Nenel Machado, Mestre Bimba’s youngest son, for a workshop in Detroit. This more direct exposure to the basics of Regional firmly entrenched in my mind that I wanted to pursue the study of this methodology.

Soon thereafter, I changed my personal training to the methodology of Regional and two years later, I formally undertook the study of Capoeira Regional. I attended trainings in Toronto, Canada with Professora Lang, a formada (graduated student) of Mestre Nenel as well as Professor Malandro (a Detroit who relocated to Oakland, California, Formado and my senior in pursuing the path of Capoeira Regional) who Mestre Nenel assigned to oversee my development. I was encouraged by Professora Lang, Professor Malandro and Mestre Nenel to start a study group in Detroit dedicated to Capoeira Regional (previously I had been teaching for 15 years under another group’s banner). After successfully completing two level evaluations under the eye of Mestre Nenel, the stars aligned and I was able to arrange a trip to Bahia for one month in the summer of 2015.

Prior to my training in Capoeira Regional of Mestre Bimba, I had many misconceptions, mostly based on what I read in books. Capoeira Regional, as I read in many books was portrayed as violent, aggressive, and lacking (whether intentional or un-intentional) connection to Afro-Brazilian culture.

My 1st day of training in the Fundação Mestre Bimba started at 11am; it was very enlightening and shattered many of those (and other stereotypes). Mestre Nenel led the class which consisted of 8 people, most who were students of Filhos de Bimba and a few visiting capoeiristas from outside of Brazil. The training started with a “warm up” of Ginga to 4 tracks (Banguela, Banguela Dobrada, Idalina Compassada and São Bento Grande) from Mestre Bimba’s *Curso de Capoeira Regional* CD. We were reminded to sway to the cadence and speed of the rhythm (a hallmark of Capoeira Regional). We then were led in very basic and fundamental moves (again matching the cadence and speed of São Bento Grande): guarda baixa (known as cocorinha in other methodologies), negative, and aú com role.

We then paired up and kicking pads were brought out. We practiced kicking combos on the pads. The combinations consisted of: Meia Lua de Frente-Esporão, Meia Lua de Frente-Martelo, Armada-Queixada de Cocanhar, just to name a few. Again, the emphasis was listening to the music and matching its cadence and speed. After kicking pad practice, we stayed with our partners. More experienced players from the school demonstrated partner attack and defense training. An example of these partner exercises:

Example 1:

- A) Armada
- B) Rasteira
- A) Negative

Example 2:

- A) Armada
- B) Guarda Baixa—Esporão
- A) Negative
- B) Aú
- A) Cabeçada
- B) Role

After the partner exercises, we paired up and executed the 8-part Sequência de Ensinar, commonly referred to as Mestre Bimba's sequence. What was interesting is that we practiced the Sequence without music. Each person had to execute the attacking part one time for each part. After each pair finished the Sequence, we got a short break to get some water.

Next, Mestre Nene grabbed a berimbau and we gathered around the red, blue and yellow circles in the middle of the cobblestone floor to form a roda. Mestre Nene played a thick and soulful São Bento Grande and two pairs entered the roda to play. There was no accompanying pandeiro or even palmas (claps) as the emphasis was on listening and responding to the berimbau. After we played each other at least twice the roda ended. We then, still in the shape of the roda, moved closer in toward the oak bench Mestre Nene sat on while playing the berimbau during our jogos (games). He then played *the Hino de Capoeira Regional* as we reflected on class, caught our breath and listened to this rich toque. After the Hino (anthem) was played we clapped, shook each other's hands (as well as Mestre Nene's) and thanked each other for class. The clock in the Fundação read 12:45 and Capoeira training was officially over. Mestre Nene put on a CD by Nas and Damian Marley as some students stretched, did push-ups and sit ups, or worked on other capoeira moves from class.

In conclusion, this paper is just an example from my first class in the methodology of Mestre Bimba. As stated earlier, I spent just a month training exclusively at the Fundação Mestre Bimba (also residing at Hostel Mestre Bimba where Mestre Nene and part of his family were residing at the time) and had many positive experiences, enlightening conversations and social interactions with capoeiristas from various groups as well as various countries. In my experience, in both class rodas and the Saturday open rodas, Regional in the Bimba methodology was not violent (it was objective), was not solely played fast (the classes were sometimes trained to the slow medium pace of Idalina Compassada or the slow pace of Banguela); the open rodas usually consisted of São Bento Grande and Idalina Compassada in equal amounts of actual time, and Mestre Nene set the tone of joyful rodas where capoeiristas of various skill levels and groups interacted respectfully. The practice of "buying the game" was not adhered to as this was not a part of Mestre Bimba's tradition (although it is incorrectly attributed to him).

I enjoyed my time in Bahia, in the Fundação Mestre Bimba, and in training Capoeira Regional with Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira (FBEC). I also completed another evaluation while I was there and met some cool people who I still keep in contact. All in all, I **began** to develop more of an understanding of Bimba's methodology as well as a greater appreciation for it and I am very happy to call Mestre Nene "meu Mestre." I hope to continue deepening my understanding of Capoeira Regional in addition to Afro-Brazilian culture and folklore in the coming years and decades.