

BLACK AGENCY AND THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF CAPOEIRA:

THE CASE OF JAMAICA*

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The story of a young German who, seduced by Brazilian capoeira and Jamaican *reggae*, left his family and friends behind, moving to the Caribbean at the turn of the millennium, suitcase and baggage in tow, will serve as a basis for trying to understand another chapter in the process of capoeira's transnationalization.¹

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1 Between mid-December 2019 and the end of January 2020, I had the opportunity to fulfill a long-held dream of visiting Jamaica. The initial idea was to take advantage of the trip to shoot an independent feature-length documentary about *reggae* on that Caribbean island and in São Luís, Maranhão, the so-called "Brazilian Jamaica", my hometown. Before the trip, after doing some research on the internet, I learned about the remarkable case of contramestre Simpson and the arrival of capoeira in Jamaica. When I contacted him, I discovered that he had already returned to Nuremberg. However, as a result of our conversations, Simpson decided to go to Kingston on his own to collaborate with the project, which at that point also included capoeira. As a result, I had the unforgettable opportunity to get to know the Jamaican capital and Montego Bay, as well as the *maroon* community of Charles Town in Portland, in the company of Simpson and his students from the Cativoiro Jamaica group. It was an intense few days talking, filming, recording interviews, attending training sessions and playing capoeira. This article as well as a short film dubbed 'Banana Way Style' are some of the results of this experience.

The young man in question is Dennis Eckart, known within the capoeira community by the nickname *Contramestre Simpson*, in reference to one of the characters of the American TV series “*The Simpsons*” whose hairstyle matched his own at the time of his capoeira initiation celebration.² Born in Nuremberg in 1982, Simpson is the first-born, followed by two siblings, one male and one female, respectively. He grew up in a middle-class family, his father was a technical school teacher and his mother a secretary at a federal agency.

During his childhood and adolescence, Simpson had his first direct contact with the culture of other countries through summer trips with his parents and grandparents, as well as through sports such as judo and karate. His school also made it possible for him to make important interchanges to other places, such as Brazil, helping to reinforce a cosmopolitan upbringing. This environment was completed without any religious orientation on the part of his parents, who did not introduce him to any doctrine, nor did they baptize him.³

Contrary to what is commonly said about the international expansion of capoeira, in this case the protagonist is not a young, black, Brazilian, poor man who crosses the Atlantic in search of better days in Europe, but a white, European boy who leaves the Old World for one of the poorest and most violent countries in the New World: Jamaica.⁴

2 The term “*contramestre*” refers to a grade in capoeira learning which, in most groups, precedes that of *mestre*. The use of this denomination varies throughout Brazil and abroad, being adopted by both *Capoeira Angola* and *Regional* groups, or by followers of other styles, such as the so-called *Contemporary Capoeira*. In recent years, some groups have replaced the term with “*mestrando*”, which reveals yet an academic influence of the on capoeira. On capoeira Angola, *Regional* and variations see: Antônio Liberac Cardoso Simões Pires, “*Movimentos da cultura afro-brasileira, 1890- 1950*”, Thesis (Doctorate in History), State University Campinas, Campinas, 2001, [\[2\]](#)

3 Information obtained from an interview given by *contramestre Simpson*, Kingston, Jamaica, on Dec. 14, 2019.

4 For a brief overview of Jamaica's socio-economic indices, see: [\[2\]](#)

Like many young people of his generation, Simpson, still a teenager, had his first contact with capoeira through practitioners who had probably already settled in Europe or who were traveling around the Old Continent trying to make a living from the practice.

The bibliography and reports by pioneers show that capoeiras have been present in Europe since at least the 1950s. One of the first to cross the Atlantic and show the "Brazilian martial art" to the European public was Bahian mestre Artur Emídio de Oliveira.⁵

From that decade onwards, various folklore groups, such as Haroldo Costa's Brasiliana group, Solano Trindade's Teatro Popular Brasileiro, and theater shows such as "Skindô" and "Brazil", toured much of the Americas and Europe, as well as part of Africa, bringing not only capoeiragem, but other black practices, such as frevo, maracatu, samba, among others.⁶

After this first phase of exploration of the European continent, from the 1970s onwards, capoeira definitely began to move to Europe and take root on the continent, through pioneers such as mestre Nestor Capoeira.⁷

Anthropologist and capoeira master Ricardo Nascimento didactically subdivides the conquest of Europe by capoeiras into three waves: the "pioneers, adventurers, musicians and dancers", which took place from the 1970s onwards; the second generation, from the 1990s, which he calls "jumpers and bullies". And finally, that of the 2000s, made up of specialists,

5 Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: The history of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*, London: Routledge, 2005. Nestor Capoeira, *Capoeira: o novo manual do jogador*, Rio de Janeiro: [s. n.], 2017. About this mestre and his career, see: Roberto Augusto A. Pereira, "O mestre Artur Emídio de Oliveira e a defesa da capoeiragem enquanto 'Luta Nacional'", *Recorde*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 11, n. 2 (2018), pp. 1-24. [↗](#)

6 For more details on this context, theater groups and shows, see: Roberto Pereira, *Rodas Negras: capoeira, samba, teatro e identidade nacional*, São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2023.

7 Capoeira, *Capoeira*, pp. 292-296. Ricardo Nascimento, *Capoeira for export: capoeira's paths and dilemmas in the global context*, Jundiaí: Paco, 2021.

"masters who may have already passed through Europe, but who settled in Brazil."⁸

A "pilgrim apprentice" - "Alemão wants to live for capoeira"

Contramestre Simpson's initial contact with capoeira took place at a time when "some groups were already structured, events such as baptisms and meetings were already taking place, and some group leaders had already obtained residence permits", as Nascimento points out when discussing the period.⁹

Simpson, in 1999, at the time 17 years old and already practicing karate, saw capoeira for the first time, fascinated, on a television program featuring a martial art exhibition in France. He immediately sought information from his trainers and learned that in his city, Nuremberg, there was a group led by Brazilian mestre Paulo Mendes, the Cativeiro group.

According to Matthias Assunção, Cativeiro emerged in 1978, founded by seven mestres from the southeast of Bahia and based in São Paulo. It was one of the groups to break away from the frameworks proposed by the Federação Paulista de Capoeira, created in 1974. The federation proposed capoeira as a sport focused on competition and largely in line with the precepts of the 1964 military dictatorship.

Opposing this direction and under the leadership of mestre Miguel Machado, prominent among its founders, Cativeiro refused to be seen as a capoeira "academy" and, with a racialized discourse, proposed the cultivation of an Afro-Brazilian heritage, valuing other black traditions such as candomblé, for example.

8 Nascimento, *Capoeira for export*, pp. 54-55.

9 Nascimento, *Capoeira for export*, p. 54.

Still according to Assunção, at the end of the 1990s, when Simpson met the group, Cativeiro had more than 100 teachers and was spread across more than seven Brazilian states and more than nine countries. Mestre Paulo Mendes, a student of Mestre Miguel Machado, was one of those who spread capoeira throughout Europe at the time.¹⁰

Thus, after joining the Nuremberg Cativeiro group, Simpson immersed himself in the world of capoeira. He eventually gave up karate and traveled to various European countries - Italy, Poland, Austria, Holland, among others - in search of more knowledge, taking part in capoeira circles, mini-courses, *workshops* and lectures in the already bustling capoeira market promoted by Brazilian capoeiras and groups based in Europe. Following in the footsteps of many new European practitioners, he saved his money to visit the land of capoeira, Brazil.

After touring the European capoeira community during his first few years of apprenticeship, contramestre Simpson traveled to Brazil four times, spending three to six months on each trip, with the aim of deepening the experience he had started in Nuremberg. In Brazil, Simpson also took part in rodas, visited affiliates of the Cativeiro group and other groups, met capoeiras, mestres and perfected his knowledge by immersing himself in the culture not only of capoeira, but of the country.¹¹

Simpson's journey is largely similar to that of thousands of foreigners who learn about and become fascinated by capoeira. Generally, these new followers - in the United States and Europe in particular - after joining a group, travel around cities and countries in search of expanding their knowledge, taking part in rodas, workshops, classes, etc. offered by capoeira masters from Brazil, belonging to their group or others.

10 Assunção, *Capoeira*, pp. 180-181. See also: [\[2\]](#)

11 Information obtained from an interview given by contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, on December 14, 2019. For more information on the cativeiro group, see: [\[2\]](#)

In this sense, this common path of immersion in capoeira could lead us to see the young German contramestre as just another "sports tourist", in other words, a fan of a sport who travels to different places where his favorite practice exists with the aim of getting involved, gaining experience or deepening his knowledge. However, in line with the analysis proposed by anthropologist Lauren Griffith about these athletes, particularly capoeira practitioners, this generic definition would not do justice to the "almost religious fervor" that these characters, and ours in this case, attribute to these trips and this experience.¹²

Simpson, at least up until the initial part of his career, which especially included his deep exploration of Brazil - where he visited the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Manaus, São Luís and Salvador, among others - is perhaps best understood from his characterization as a "pilgrim apprentice", a concept proposed by Griffith. In other words, his case follows the model of an apprentice who, like a religious pilgrim, has the ultimate goal or dream of traveling to the place of origin of his favorite practice - seen as sacred - to obtain knowledge directly from the source, from a local master.

Deep down, according to the author, the desire of this type of apprentice is to be recognized by their peers and especially to have their practice legitimized by the mestre, the greatest authority in the field. Like Simpson, the capoeiras traveling to Brazil, studied by Griffith, were young, from a financially stable family, well-educated and seeking physical, social and spiritual transformation through their immersion in the practice.¹³

The case of contramestre Simpson, unlike that of many others, left written records in some places. According to an article published in the Manaus press, it was probably in 2002, when he passed through the capital of Amazonas,

12 Lauren Miller Griffith, "Apprenticeship pilgrims and the acquisition of legitimacy", *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, v. 18, n. 1 (2013), p. 1-15; p. 2.

13 Lauren Miller Griffith, *In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of an Afro-Brazilian Tradition*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2016.

the passion for capoeira made young German Dennis Eckart (sic), just 20 years old, abandon everything to devote himself entirely to the art created by Afro-Brazilian slaves [...] white with blue eyes, he says he has 'incorporated' the art into his life and no longer thinks of doing anything else.¹⁴

The article highlights another aspect of this type of pilgrim studied by Griffith: his deep commitment to the art, to the point of abandoning, in his case, his family, a promising career path or what could be a life within society's standards, with a formal job, regular working hours, a fixed salary, financial stability, an academic career, etc.¹⁵

Another note published, this time by the press in the city of Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, with a photo of young Simpson playing the berimbau alongside a Brazilian teacher, said that the student was passing through the city, where he would stay for around three weeks for an internship at the cativeiro group's academy. From there, he would then leave for Itabuna, in the south of Bahia, where the group's national headquarters is located.¹⁶

14 Conramestre Simpson archive, Nuremberg, newspaper clipping, German wants to live for capoeira, undated.

15 Griffith, "Apprenticeship pilgrims", p. 10.

16 Conramestre Simpson archive, newspaper clipping, German capoeirista does internship in Ribeirão Preto, undated.

Figure 1
Simpson, in 1999, at age 17, on his first capoeira immersion trip to Brazil. Article of the São Paulo press



Source: Contramestre Simpson's archive.

According to Simpson himself, one of his main motivations for coming to Brazil was to meet mestre Miguel Machado, who at the time was already cativeiro's leading mestre. His trip to Bahia and personal contact with the group's founding mestre certainly represented an *upgrade* in his career as a foreign capoeira, as well as a great personal achievement.

As Griffith points out when referring to the journey of these capoeiras, this type of pilgrimage, which makes it possible to get to know the place of origin of the practice - Brazil, Bahia in this case - as well as having the possibility of having contact or even living for a few days or months with the founding mestre of the group himself, adds a difference, an extra symbolic value to these practitioners compared to other foreign capoeiras who have not had the same experience.¹⁷

In Simpson's case, in addition to Itabuna, he accompanied mestre Miguel to events in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, having the opportunity to live with and learn directly from him, forging his own path, building his own story and keeping many memories, some good and some not so good, such as the pneumonia he caught from sleeping on the floor of the gym in São Paulo. Although this, for example, was certainly a dangerous and painful experience, overcoming it and recording it adds value to his experience, setting his career apart from that of other foreigners who didn't have the same opportunities.¹⁸

On the other hand, while personal archives are the result of a selection process in which the archivist typically preserves what he wants to safeguard for posterity or highlight about his journey—at the expense of what he obscures or discards in the 'trash bin of history,' generally that which he seeks to cover up, forget, or not remember—it can be affirmed that the newspaper clippings in Simpson's archive reflect his alleged fascination with capoeira from the very beginning, as well as his ongoing quest to learn more about the roots of the practice and Brazilian culture.

17 Griffith, *In Search of Legitimacy*, p. 62.

18 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

It was during one of these trips to Brazil that another event indelibly marked the life of the young capoeira from Nuremberg: his passage through the city of São Luís. Due to the strength and influence of Jamaican *reggae* in the city, the capital of Maranhão - once proudly known as the "Brazilian Athens" or the "city founded by the French" - has gone through a long and complex process of building a new identity since the end of the 1970s. Leaving behind strong European references, São Luís, still French in name, has become, to the chagrin of some sectors of the local intelligentsia, the "Brazilian Jamaica".¹⁹

The black and Caribbean musicality anchored on this small island in the northeast of Brazil changed Simpson's life trajectory. In order to understand the impact on young Simpson of the strong Jamaican culture present in São Luís - a culture which, as aforementioned, would not only have transformed Simpson himself, but also the very identity of the city and its inhabitants - it is important to note that at the time of his visit, the capital of Maranhão was going through one of the peak periods of influence of Jamaican rhythm and music. Hundreds of *reggae* bars could be found throughout the city, as well as several radiolas (soundsystems) with gigantic amplifier walls. Furthermore numerous *Reggae* clubs at the beaches catered to thousands of people every weekend and regular concerts featuring artists directly from Jamaica attracted crowds to soccer stadiums and open-air arenas.²⁰

19 Carlos Benedito Rodrigues da Silva, *Da terra das primaveras à ilha do amor: reggae, lazer e identidade cultural*, São Luís: Edufma, 1995; Carlos Benedito Rodrigues da Silva, *Ritmos da Identidade: mestiçagens e sincretismos na cultura do Maranhão*, São Luís: Edufma, 2007. For a brief but more recent discussion, see: Roberto Pereira, "O reggae e a transformação da 'Atenas Brasileira' em 'Jamaica Brasileira'", *Nexo Jornal*, 4 Apr. 2023. [↗](#)

20 Silva, *From the land of springs to the island of love*. Ramusyo Brasil, *O reggae no caribe brasileiro*, São Luís: Pitomba, 2014.

As a result, the passage through the "Brazilian Jamaica" was decisive for the new course that Simpson's life would take. In his own words:

It was during one of those trips, the one that started in Manaus, that I ended up in São Luís and it was one of the moments that impacted my life from that time on until today, because I had closer contact with reggae culture and also some other things happened there that left a deep mark on my life [...] so when I went back to Germany, I finished school and I knew that the world was calling me [...] to travel more.²¹

Another Simpson returned home at the end of 2002, full of existential questions about his life's purpose, his career and his education. Having decided to abandon the standards expected by society and his family, such as continuing his studies, going to college, finding a regular job, a family, etc., Simpson had decided, so to speak, impregnated by the spirit of capoeiragem, "to experience living in Brazil, interacting with people [...] to develop a kind of wisdom, of street savviness, something that I felt was missing in my life, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to experience more of the world in my life."²²

The decision to abandon the plans of society and his family and become not just a capoeira practitioner, but "to be a capoeira", led contramestre Simpson to decide to leave Germany, where people, according to his observation at the time, would mostly practice capoeira as a sport, a hobby or as mere entertainment. Capoeira to him had already become "a way and a philosophy of life", thus by looking for "other folks who could also benefit from the art, I wanted to use capoeira to have a positive impact on other people's lives which in return would fulfill me, give me pleasure, give more meaning to my life."²³

21 Information obtained from an interview with Contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

22 Information obtained from an interview with Contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

23 Information obtained from an interview with Contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019. Note this differentiation, made by Simpson,

Moving to Jamaica - expectations, disappointments and the racial barrier

The assessments made by contramestre Simpson at the time led him to conclude that, despite being “immensely passionate about Brazil”, a German capoeirista would struggle to make a significant difference in a Brazilian city, surrounded by so many native teachers, mestres, and contramestres. Conflicted between his love for Brazil and his desire to make a meaningful impact on others through capoeira, Simpson realized there was a country where capoeira had yet to be established.

His increasing involvement with reggae was a key factor in the outcome of his future and his decision to move to Jamaica. According to him:

I was very involved with music and reggae, Jamaica became a thing to me, I became more aware of Jamaica, reggae had impacted me for many years, even though in the beginning I wasn't able to fully understand all of the lyrics or what all of the songs were about, but something impacted me, reggae hit me and moved me more than physically and I started to look at Jamaica more closely.²⁴

In this sense, Simpson sought information about the presence of capoeira in Jamaica from mestres and on the internet.

I started reading, I went to the library, and I read about Jamaica, the culture and history of Jamaica and I quickly realized that there was a lot of similarity with what happened in Brazil, in terms of the colonial times, slavery, the same people who were taken as slaves to Brazil were taken to Jamaica, so there was a lot of similarity in terms of history, the colonial past.²⁵

between the practitioner who sees capoeira merely as a sport like any other and the one who sees it as something beyond, transforming his own life and that of others, something a bit mystical or almost sacred, is in line with Griffith's differentiation between the "sports tourist" and the "pilgrim apprentice". See: Griffith, *In Search of Legitimacy*, p. 62.

24 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

25 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, on December 14, 2019.

As can be deduced, learning capoeira has led him to gain insight not only into its movements, rituals, symbols, icons, and mestres, but also into the history of Brazil, its colonization, and the black resistance against slavery—topics often passed down by capoeira mestres, either orally or through songs.

Furthermore, the identification of similarities between the history of slave exploitation and oppression in Brazil and Jamaica, and particularly quilombola resistance, led Contramestre Simpson to conclude that Jamaica would be a good place to develop capoeira:

I learned a lot from my mestre and from mestre Miguel Machado, from the Cativeiro group, and from other mestres, about the quilombolas in Brazil, the *maroon* towns, the slaves who fled and defended themselves against the colonial power in Brazil and, when I looked more closely at Jamaica, I saw that there were also these people who created a similar movement and fought successfully for their freedom for many decades, first against the Spanish, then against the English. So, I thought, if I as a young German can identify with capoeira and can live with, through and for capoeira, it should probably be much easier for someone from Jamaica to identify. And, even if there is no capoeira in Jamaica and nobody in Jamaica knows about capoeira, then, in my mind, at that time, I thought that, if people would find out about capoeira, its history, they would fall in love with it, they would identify with it even more easily than I did.²⁶

For Simpson, the colonial slave past, the experience of slavery and black resistance, as well as the common African ancestry, would be factors that would lead Jamaicans to identify more easily with capoeira than he, a young, white, European. With the aim of making capoeira an option in life, along with these historical similarities between the two countries, the hypothesis of an easy acceptance of the practice, and strongly influenced by *reggae*, the still young instructor left the Old World and moved to Jamaica in 2004, all by himself.

26 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, on December 14, 2019.

With just enough resources to support himself for the first few months, Simpson wanted to turn capoeira into an instrument to change people's lives in Jamaica, something that capoeira had done for him. In his own words:

With that in mind, in 2004 I came to Jamaica. I took a flight to Montego Bay, not really knowing where to go or what to do. I got off the plane and started getting by in Mobay [Montego Bay] for the first few days and weeks. Thus began my journey in Jamaica. I was already an instructor. I came to help and teach capoeira and also to see if there was anyone in Jamaica who knew capoeira or was open to learning. So for the first few weeks, I remember clearly, I was walking up and down the city, in Montego Bay, trying to figure out the place and I kept comparing and relating it to my experience in Brazil.²⁷

From his testimony, it appears that Simpson's trip to the Caribbean island was an entirely personal initiative, similar to that of many of the pioneering capoeiras in Europe and the United States. As mestre Nestor Capoeira says, the practice "began to take over the world through the personal initiative of (then) young mestres."²⁸

According to Matthias Assunção, since the 1970s, the expansion of capoeira has reached countries other than Europe and the United States. By the 2000s, according to the historian, capoeira was expanding to Eastern Europe, part of Southeast Asia and Latin America.²⁹ The late case of Jamaica also fits into this context.

In the first half of that decade, contramestre Simpson began to expand Brazilian martial arts to yet another quadrant of the world map. It didn't take long, however, for the young capoeirista to test his hypothesis and prove that it wasn't well-founded. Contrary to what he had thought, the historical and cultural similarities were not enough for the Jamaicans

27 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

28 Capoeira, *Capoeira*, p. 293.

29 Assunção, *Capoeira*, p. 193.

to fall in love with capoeira at first sight: "I thought: it's a tropical country, it's going to be more or less like Brazil. But I quickly realized that wasn't the case, and that Jamaica is a very unique place. And in many ways, I was shocked and surprised at how it wasn't like what I imagined it would be."³⁰

However, despite his disappointment, Simpson's initial hypothesis was not unfounded. Although there was no capoeira in Jamaica, the African diaspora in the Caribbean, as well as in the Americas as a whole, was responsible, among many things, for the emergence of various black practices, such as capoeira and samba, or religions of African origin such as Jamaican kumina or Cuban santería.

When asked if there is any martial art similar to capoeira in Jamaica, Kara Pessoa, a Jamaican student of contramestre Simpson, also known as "Perna Longa", says:

I don't think there was a martial art like capoeira, capoeira [in Jamaica], but we have a lot of similarities like the Jamaican quilombolas and their drums, dances, with call and answer. But they don't necessarily have a martial art that I know of [...] the only similar thing I can think of, um, we also have a religion called pokomina that has music and dance, like candomblé, but a martial art, no, not that I know of.³¹

Kara had her first contact with capoeira in Miami, while on an exchange program. On one of her trips back to Jamaica in the 2000s, she discovered that Simpson was teaching in her city, Kingston. Since then, she has joined the cativeiro group and is one of its main promoters.

It is interesting to note that she does not refer to the absence of a black martial art in Jamaica, but to the existence of black practices that are similar to Afro-Brazilian practices, such as dances with call and

30 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

31 Information obtained from an interview with Kara Pessoa, Kingston, Jamaica, Jan. 6, 2020.

answer, the drums, the African religion *pokomina* or *Kumina*, as it is also known, as well as the experience of the *maroons*, communities of fugitives similar to Brazilian quilombos. When it comes to combat practices recreated in the New World, as Matthias Assunção says, no one should be surprised to find similar combat techniques in different parts of the continent, such as martial arts or games using kicks, headbutts, fists and sticks.³²

In like manner two scholars explain:

Similar to what happened with capoeira in Brazil, after the end of slavery, black communities in the Caribbean and in some regions of Africa continued to perfect the techniques left over from African combat systems, refining their movements and practicing them in the form of a friendly game, where musical accompaniment always played a fundamental role.³³

This is the case, for example, with Ladjá, which emerged in neighboring Martinique. The fight has many similarities with capoeira, in terms of movement, blows, use of music and dance, as the aforementioned authors also describe.

Assunção also refers to evidence of the presence of wrestling matches, also accompanied by music, practiced by enslaved people in the 17th century in one of Jamaica's neighboring countries, Barbados. He also points to evidence of female participation in combat games in 18th century Jamaica itself. However, according to this scholar, stick games were the most widespread combat techniques in the Caribbean, on the most diverse islands, such as Trinidad, Carriacou (Grenada), Haiti, the Dominican Republic, among others, as well as in Brazil.³⁴

32 Assunção, *Capoeira*, p. 59, our translation.

33 Marcelo Backes Navarro Stotz and José Luiz Cirqueira Falcão, "Ritmo e rebeldia em jogo: só na luta da capoeira se canta e dança?", *Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte*, Florianópolis, v. 34, n. 1 (2012), pp. 95-110, [DOI](#). p. 96.

34 Assunção, *Capoeira*, p. 59.


In order to understand this complex set of emerging practices in the context of the African diaspora, it may be useful to turn to the classic analysis of Sidney Mintz and Richard Price when they state that "Africans in any New World colony only really became a *community* and began to share a *culture* to the extent and at the pace that they themselves created them."³⁵

In other words, and in line with what Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall advocates, these new Afro-diasporic creations, such as capoeira, *ladja*, *kumina*, etc., are the result of a complex set of elements involving an African heritage, the conditions imposed by colonization, contributions from the European colonizer himself, as well as sometimes from the native peoples and others who joined this violent experience of building the New World.

In Hall's words, so-called black culture is the result

of partial synchronizations, of engagements that cross cultural boundaries, of confluences of more than one cultural tradition, of negotiations between dominant and subaltern positions, of subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification and the act of signifying from pre-existing materials. These forms are always impure, to a certain extent hybridized from a vernacular base.³⁶

Furthermore, it is worth noting that these creations are not, of course, restricted to the field of combat games, but to the entire universe that emerged in the New World.

35 Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *O nascimento da cultura Afro-Americana: uma perspectiva antropológica*, Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2003, p. 33. For an analysis of capoeira from this perspective, see the concept of "creolization" defended by Assunção: Matthias Röhrig Assunção, "Capoeira, arte crioula", *Cultures-Kairós*, 2012, 

36 Stuart Hall, "Que 'negro' é esse na cultura negra?" in Liv Sovik (ed.), *Da diáspora: Identidades e medicões culturais* (Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG, 2003), pp. 335-349. p. 343.

On the other hand, what perhaps created some initial incomprehension among many Jamaicans was the fact that this black Brazilian martial art was, at the time, introduced by a white, German man. The accounts of Simpson and some of his older students, such as Tarik Perkins (Baiano), Rodane Radcliff (Perninha), Richard Murray (Ferro) and Kara Pessoa, show that, as well as not immediately falling in love with capoeira, some Jamaicans were suspicious of the good intentions of a capoeira that had similar origins to their colonizers: Europe.³⁷

Simpson recounts in his interviews that on a few occasions he went to the market in the city center with a group of mostly Jamaican children and young people, to put on shows and promote capoeira. When they saw the unknown demonstration, several people encouraged them by throwing coins into the roda. Others, however, shouted: "What are you doing? There's a white man teaching our children to fight each other and divide us."³⁸

This negative reaction is clearly a rejection of Simpson's European origin and all that this historically represents in a country that is eminently black and comes from a brutal experience of slavery.

This certainty that Simpson's European origin caused at least some Jamaicans discomfort is also confirmed by the account of Ângelo dos Anjos Oliveira, known as Mestre Capacete.³⁹

At the beginning of the 2000s, when he was still an instructor with the Cativeiro group in Manaus, capital of Amazonas. Capacete met Simpson on one of his first trips to Brazil.

37 The interviews with Tarik, Richard, Kara and Rodane took place on December 12, 2019, December 28, 2019, January 6, 2020 and January 7, 2020, respectively.

38 Information obtained from an interview with Contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019. The practice of throwing money into the roda as an incentive is not common in Brazil. What sometimes happens in street rodas is the practice of the capoeiras themselves "passing the pandeiro" asking for a cash contribution, something similar to passing the hat in other street performances by artists.

39 Mestre Capacete, a native of Manaus, is currently based in Rome, Italy, where he teaches and heads the Matumbé Capoeira Angola School.

From then on, the friendship between the two became closer and about two years after the young German was living in Jamaica, Capacete received an invitation to help with the project to spread capoeira on the Caribbean island, where he arrived in 2006.

During the three years he spent in Jamaica, from 2006 to mid-2009, Capacete says he noticed a difference in the way some Jamaicans treated him, at least initially, or on first contact, because he was seen as "brown". For Capacete, the fact that he was "brown", in other words, the fact that he also had black ancestry and carried the experience of slavery in his ancestral past, certainly made him more receptive to many Jamaicans.

In addition, for him, being Brazilian also contributed to a greater cultural rapprochement, particularly on the outskirts of Jamaica. Capacete refers to occasions when they arrived in certain places and were viewed with suspicion because people didn't understand what they were talking about, but when they saw the presence of a "brown" and a Brazilian, the "ice was broken."⁴⁰

The marks of the slave-owning past, of course, are present in the most diverse societies of the New World. And in Jamaica, black heroes who fought against slavery and its colonial legacy - such as Paul Bogle, Tacky, Queen Nanny and Marcus Garvey - are worshipped in the streets, in paintings, monuments, statues and are even engraved on coins and banknotes, which contributes to building a strong racial identity among Jamaicans on a daily basis.⁴¹

40 Information obtained from an interview given by Mestre Capacete, via *google meet*, March 22, 2024.

41 For a very general overview of these black Jamaican leaders, see Professor Vicent Brown's article for *The Guardian*: Vicent Brown, "A historic revolt, a forgotten hero, an empty plinth: is there a right way to remember slavery?", *The Guardian*, 26 Mar. 2024, [.🔗](#)

Not to mention music, particularly roots reggae, which keeps alive the memory of black Caribbean resistance against colonizers and slavery. *Reggae*, particularly that produced by the most popular Rastafarian artists, such as Bob Marley and Burning Spear, to take two of the most notorious examples, repeatedly brought up images and memories of slavery, permanently reviving history and the past in the present.⁴²

This strong black Jamaican identity, consolidated in recent times, as Stuart Hall explains, which makes it, let's say, more alive, did not let Simpson's European origin go unnoticed, and was a factor that contributed to erecting, in a way, at least initially, a racial barrier to the activity of the German capoeirista, even though he was spreading a black martial art.⁴³

Other hurdles, surprises and disappointments also marked the trajectory of contramestre Simpson in those early years. One of them, noticed in the very first days after his arrival on the "island of reggae", was the absence of *roots reggae* in the streets, bars, houses and parties of Jamaica. Still strongly marked by his time in São Luís, where the

42 In the lyrics of "Slave driver", from the album *Catch a Fire*, 1978, for example, Bob Marley recalled: "every time I hear the crack of a whip/my blood runs cold/I remember the slave ship/how they brutalized our souls". Burning Spear, still active, asks insistently in "Slavery days", from the album *Marcus Garvey*, 1975: "do you remember the times of slavery?". These songs, chosen to illustrate the assertion, are considered classics of the Jamaican repertoire and are therefore still played today on various platforms, inside and outside Jamaica, and cultivated by *reggae* lovers. Recently, American professor Vicent Brown, from Harvard University, stated the impact that Burning Spear's question - do you remember the days of slavery? - has had on his life since the first time he heard it at a *concert*. According to the eminent historian, he didn't have an immediate answer, but he ended up becoming a historian of slavery. And as well as growing his hair out in dreadlock style, Brown decided to commit himself to teaching history as a way of contributing to the growth and enlightenment of himself and others. See: Brown, "A historic revolt".

43 According to Stuart Hall, in the second half of the 20th century, *reggae* and Rastafarianism were *sine qua non* factors in Jamaica's identity transformation from a country that saw itself as mixed-race and mirrored the English metropolis, to a country that proudly assumed itself to be black. See: Stuart Hall, *Familiar stranger: a Life Between two Islands*, Durhan, UK: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 57; see also: Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean identities", *New Left review*, v. 209 (1995), pp. 3-14, .[↗](#)

genre was at its peak, Simpson was unaware that since the late 1980s, the Jamaican rhythm that had conquered the world with the incendiary lyrics of Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh and many others, was "a thing of the past". By the early 1990s, another reggae-derived rhythm, dancehall, had become the dominant genre in Jamaica.⁴⁴

Simpson had learned about Jamaica through music.

As he states,

if it hadn't been for reggae, I would probably never have discovered Jamaica [...] In Jamaica, it was totally different from what I expected in many ways [...] even the kind of reggae, roots reggae that I used to listen to, that moved me, when I arrived in Jamaica and looked for this style of music, people would say: That's old people's music, why listen to it again? Because *dancehall* was already dominant, people only listened to modern reggae and *dancehall*. The kind of music I liked was only played a little bit at night, or at weekends.⁴⁵

Faced with a reality so different from his ideas and plans, it was up to the contramestre to face facts. In addition to the usual need to adapt to the new country, the initial days, weeks and months were spent looking for students and spaces to teach capoeira. Drawing parallels, we can say that, without any support from the Brazilian or German state, or from private companies, Simpson was treading on his own, in a poor Caribbean country, the paths taken decades before by the Brazilian capoeiras who had explored Europe and the United States. Perhaps without realizing it, he was taking a fundamental step in the process of capoeira's transnationalization and became one of the many characters in this story.

As he had suspected, there was no capoeira in Jamaica at the time. Later, he learned that years before, a capoeirista, apparently English, had tried unsuccessfully to introduce the practice to the island. Some of his students also report having heard about it. As Jamaican Tarik

44 For more on the subject, see: Donna Patricia Hope, *Inna di dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica*, Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006.

45 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

Perkins says in Portuguese, "After I met Contramestre Simpson, I heard that there were other groups, but before I met him, I never heard of them."⁴⁶ As you can see, the information is vague, without any reference to the capoeira in question, name, year or group to which he belonged. Therefore, if any capoeira had passed through Jamaica before, which is not impossible, it left no mark. In the 15 years that Simpson was on the island, for example, no student of this supposed capoeira instructor appeared. As in many places on the planet, most contact Jamaicans had with Brazilian martial arts before their arrival was through the film *Only the Strong* (1993), translated in Brazil as *Esporte sangrento* ("Blood sport").

The feature film, a Hollywood production directed by American filmmaker Sheldon Lettich and starring Hawaiian actor Mark Dacascos, circulated the world in the 1990s, giving many people their first visual contact with the practice. According to Ricardo Nascimento, most researchers highlight the importance of the film in spreading capoeira around the world:

The film, as well as a stereotyped copy of capoeira conveyed in its images, could be seen by thousands of young people in the most remote parts of the world and, in some cases, led to the creation of informal groups of practitioners who, only years later [...] had contact with Brazilian teachers and masters⁽⁴⁷⁾

Something similar had happened in Jamaica, as Rodane, now a Jamaican capoeira instructor, tells us:

I started capoeira in 2012, I was at university, my first year [...]. They brought Simpson to university and I started practicing. It was the first time I saw capoeira in Jamaica. But I remember seeing the movie 'Only the Strong' on television when I was younger.

46 Information obtained from an interview with Tarik Perkins, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 28, 2019. In the interviews mentioned above - with Rodane Radcliffe, Richard Murray and Kara Pessoa - Simpson's three students corroborate this statement.

47 Nascimento, *Capoeira for export*, p. 39.

I thought it was cool, but I didn't really understand what capoeira was. But when my friend [who brought Simpson to the University] showed me, he said it's the same thing you saw in that movie, 'Only the Strong'. - Ah! So it's capoeira.⁴⁸

All the students I interviewed or spoke to remembered having seen it. Despite this, its screening did not lead to the emergence of any indigenous group of capoeiras in Jamaica, as had happened, for example, in Poland in the 1990s, where the Polish Adan Faba, after watching the film, spread the practice throughout the country, giving rise to numerous groups, as Nascimento points out.⁴⁹

Simpson and his students recall that many Jamaicans, when watching a capoeira roda by the Jamaican cativoiro group, claimed to know the practice through the movie and called it, curiously, *banana way style*. The hilarious name comes from the fact that the popular capoeira song "paranauê", which formed the soundtrack of the movie, was understood by many Jamaicans as "banana way". Therefore, capoeira would be the "banana way" style of fighting.

Although it didn't bear fruit in Jamaica, the film was important a decade later in making it easier for Jamaicans to understand what capoeira was. As Rodane notes once again:

Many people in Jamaica know this movie. But they don't know capoeira by name, they know it as 'banana way', because of the words. They understood paranauê as 'banana way'. This is to help us to bring it across to people. Make it more familiar to them. We say: 'Capoeira'. They say: 'Ca, ?' And we say: banana way. They say: 'Oh, the dance-fight. - "Yes, it's called capoeira."⁵⁰

In 2004, when Contramestre Simpson arrived in Jamaica, capoeira was an almost completely unknown practice. At most,

48 Information obtained from an interview with instructor Rodane Radcliffe, Kingston, Jamaica, Jan. 7, 2020.

49 Nascimento, *Capoeira for export*, p. 122.

50 Information obtained from an interview with Professor Rodane Radcliffe, Kingston, Jamaica, Jan. 7, 2020.

a remote memory latent in the memory of many Jamaicans who had seen it on television a decade earlier. So, alone, without funding or support, with few resources of his own, Simpson had an arduous task ahead of him to make his dream of spreading capoeira in that country a reality.

The trajectory of contramestre Simpson could easily be the subject of a book or a feature-length documentary. In this article, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, we don't have any "biographical illusions" or the pretension to delve into a linear, teleological narrative, as if it were possible to account for his entire experience on the Caribbean island. In this way, we believe it is more accurate to try to approach some aspects of our protagonist's time in Jamaica from the available sources.⁵¹

For the readers' better understanding, we can state, based on the interviews conducted and the archival documents analyzed, that in the initial years, in addition to willpower, courage and persistence, Simpson relied on unknown people who crossed his path eventually and helped him in some way, providing temporary shelter, information and tips on life in Jamaica.

The first few months in the country are very similar to the experience of pioneers in different parts of the world: many difficulties, searching for students and teaching space, "odd jobs" to get money for rent and other expenses, establishing contacts.⁵²

One of these contacts took him from Montego Bay, his first point of arrival, to Kingston, which would become the base for his work. Based in Jamaica's capital, besides initially teaching in a few gyms, as well as working as a truck loader, *personal trainer*, etc., Simpson bet on something he had learned about in Brazil: organizing projects aimed at disadvantaged communities and seeking partnerships with Jamaican and international social organizations.

51 Pierre Bourdieu, "A ilusão biográfica" in Janáina Amado e Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (org.), *Usos e abusos da história oral* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2006), pp. 183-192. p. 185.

52 On this subject see: Frede Abreu and Maurício Barros de Castro (eds.), *Capoeira*, Rio de Janeiro: Azogue Editorial, 2009, p. 96.

Promoting peace and non-violence through capoeira in Jamaica

In this respect, the introduction of capoeira in Jamaica differs from the way it spread to Europe and the United States. However, it kept similar characteristics to the way it is still spread in various parts of Brazil today. The similarity with the situation in Brazil can be explained by the conditions of social inequality and violence common to both countries.

As Simpson says in one of his accounts:

In the months and years that followed, I made contact with different organizations, both local and international, and started teaching children, young people especially, but also adults, mainly in volatile inner-city communities and eventually created an organization called Capoeira Alafia, which is an organization that aims to promote peace and non-violence through capoeira, as well as projects involving permaculture and recycling.⁵³

Around much of Brazil, capoeira is still a practice associated with social outreach projects aimed at the underprivileged. This work provides socialization for young people living in high-risk or violent areas and is generally carried out in residents' associations, community centers, schools, etc., often with the support of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

53 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019. See also: [\[2\]](#)

Figure 2
Simpson, with his berimbau, leads a circle of Jamaicans⁵⁴



Source: Contramestre Simpson's archive.

The Brazilian Embassy in Jamaica issued a letter of recommendation, dated December 3, 2012, in support of contramestre Simpson to the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts, a visual arts school based in Kingston, informing that he had been associated with and supported by the embassy since 2005. This was the beginning of the collaboration between Simpson and various Jamaican and international organizations.⁵⁵

Shortly before, Simpson had founded a branch of the Cativoeiro group in Jamaica. With the group registered, he later managed to launch a project with the support of the Organization of American States (OAS), as well as obtaining support from the Brazilian Embassy to bring some of his groups instructors from Brazil to Kingston to help him spread capoeira throughout the Caribbean island.

54 Note the panel in the background with the logo "Fight for Peace" and "Luta pela Paz", English and Brazilian organizations, respectively, that support projects aimed at needy and violent communities around the world. See: [\[link\]](#)

55 ACS, letter of support, "Embassy of Brazil", Dec. 3, 2012.

A document from Simpson's archive, stamped "urgent", issued by the OAS and addressed to the Jamaican Minister of Labor and Social Security, dated May 2, 2006, stated that, as part of the OAS activities related to the "Capoeira for Empowerment and Peace" project, and in collaboration with the Federative Republic of Brazil, three Brazilian capoeiras were arriving in Jamaica for a one-year period of teaching and dissemination activities.

The capoeiras were Jairo Antunes Júnior, Cristiane Garcia Pereira, as well as the aforementioned Ângelo Oliveira, mestre Capacete.⁵⁶ As you can see, about a year after establishing relations with the Brazilian Embassy in Jamaica, Simpson was already reaping the first fruits of this cooperation. According to Simpson, "these were the first three instructors we managed to bring with the aim of spreading capoeira throughout Jamaica. Some of them stayed for several years and were later replaced by others from the Cativeiro group. I had met them in Brazil."⁵⁷

Years later, an Amazonian newspaper recorded the visit of some of these Brazilian instructors to Jamaica. Under the heading "Africa", according to the newspaper, a project started in Manaus by the Cativeiro group in 2001 had been set up in the country with the support of the OAS and the Brazilian Embassy in Jamaica and was helping "120 children at social risk" in Kingston. In addition to Simpson, the newspaper identifies the then instructor Capacete and the instructor Mandinga (Cristiane Garcia Pereira) as coordinators of the project.⁵⁸

With the support of some organizations along with the Brazilian and Jamaican governments and the arrival of capoeiras from Brazil, the work finally began to take off. From then on, Simpson was able to energize and expand his work and, literally, spread capoeira throughout the island, teaching classes, workshops, lectures, promoting and taking part in

56 ACS, letter, "Organization of American States", 02 May 2006.

57 Information obtained from an interview with contramestre Simpson, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 14, 2019.

58 ACS, newspaper clipping, "Professor takes capoeira to Jamaica", undated.

events, making television appearances, giving interviews to newspapers, radio stations, etc.

A document issued by the *Jamaica Cultural Development Commission*, a body linked to the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, records the rapid insertion of capoeira in the country. The letter of thanks highlights Simpson's contribution to the 2006 Heritage Fest, an annual festival that celebrates Jamaica's cultural heritage. The text also stated that this was the "first inclusion of a Brazilian artistic performance" in the festival.⁵⁹

In turn, the Jamaican press coverage of the Jamaican cativairo group highlights the social outreach work promoted through capoeira. In a country with high rates of poverty and violence, the practice was presented, perhaps idealistically by Simpson and his companions, if not as a possible solution to the problem, at least as a way of helping to rescue some young people from this situation of social danger.

The social concern of contramestre Simpson and the cativairo group also did not go unnoticed by Brazil's diplomatic representatives in Jamaica. In his letter of recommendation to the group, the then Brazilian ambassador to Jamaica, C ezar Amaral, stated that he observed:

The organization's dedication and extraordinary commitment to promoting Afro-Brazilian culture and the martial art of Capoeira *as a social tool for integration and the development of self-esteem, as well as a means of resolving conflicts throughout Jamaica, is a source of great joy.*

According to Amaral,

the unique approach of promoting peace and non-violence through Capoeira is highly admirable. *The organization is successfully using Capoeira to develop self-esteem and discipline among*

⁵⁹ ACS, letter of thanks, "Jamaica Cultural Development Commission", 26 Oct. 2006 (our translation).

*marginalized children and young people living in degraded urban and forgotten rural communities.*⁶⁰

The support received from the Brazilian Embassy in Jamaica, in turn, can also be understood in the context of the upward trajectory that capoeira was following in the last decades of the 20th century, with its national and international expansion.

In 2004, in Geneva, Switzerland, Gilberto Gil, then Minister of Culture in the Lula da Silva government, presented the "Brazilian and International Program for Capoeira", recognizing the practice as an "icon of Brazil's representativeness before the peoples".⁶¹ This state initiative was followed shortly afterwards by the recognition of capoeira as a cultural heritage of Brazil (2008) and later of Humanity (2014). As Ferreira points out, the support of the Brazilian state was a late factor and therefore absent in the case of the pioneers of the spread of capoeira in Europe and the United States, for example.⁶²

Just as the state's position on capoeira was changing, international organizations also began to "perceive" capoeira. As an example, "capoeira is placed within the program for mobilizing schools belonging to UNESCO's network of schools to combat racism, discrimination and exclusion, as a practice of "Africans of the diaspora."⁶³

Simpson's approach of working with capoeira with a social bias - something he learned in Brazil, as it turns out - certainly facilitated his rapprochement with Jamaican social organizations that shared similar goals, as well as helping him to

60 ACS, C zar Augusto de Souza Lima Amaral, "Recommendation letter"

61 Daniel Granada da Silva Ferreira, "Adaptation in motion: The process of 'transnationalization' of capoeira in France", *Antropol tica: Revista Contempor nea de Antropologia*, v. 24, n. 1-2 (1995), p. 72.

62 Ferreira, *Adaptation in motion*, p. 72.

63 Ferreira, *Adaptation in motion*, p. 73.

drawing the attention and support of international organizations such as the OAS and even the Brazilian Embassy.

Drawing a parallel with the trajectory of the capoeiras who preceded Simpson in the transnationalization of the practice, it is important to note that the idea of using capoeira for purposes other than sport and fighting, in other words, for social outreach, to help poor and marginalized populations - a perspective that is still very present in Brazil - was not the same as the one of capoeiras who had been leaving Brazil since the 1970s for Europe or the United States.

Without wishing to make any value judgments, those capoeiras, as much as they had the same passion for capoeira as mestre Simpson certainly does, used the practice fundamentally as a commodity to be sold, as a means of survival, or as an instrument for economic and social ascension. As Assunção writes, many capoeiras came to the Old Continent in search of a better life. As much as capoeira has expanded on a global scale, there has actually been a greater focus on the more prosperous areas of the globe, such as Europe and the United States, places where Brazilian immigrants are attracted and where - not by chance - many of the largest groups in the world are concentrated today.⁶⁴ According to Falcão,

the movement to spread capoeira around the world is more visible and intense in the United States and Europe. With rare exceptions committed to developing work to 'return' this art-fight to Africa, most of the initiatives are aimed at the so-called developed countries.⁶⁵

According to the author, for example, "by 2003, there were capoeira schools in all 50 US states. In New York alone, there were 15 schools."⁶⁶

64 Assunção, *Capoeira*, pp. 192-193.

65 José Luiz Cirqueira Falcão, "A internacionalização da capoeira", *Revista Textos do Brasil*, Brasília, DF, n. 14 (2008), pp. 126-127.

66 Falcão, "The internationalization of capoeira", p. 127.

Jamaica is one of these exceptions. It should also be noted that someone who wanted to improve their living conditions or rise socially through the practice of capoeira would not look for a poor Caribbean country as a port of arrival.

This social use of capoeira, transplanted to Jamaica, particularly abroad, perhaps reveals another phase of its expansion, now aimed at poor countries in America or Africa. In this case, capoeiras or groups spread the practice by targeting underprivileged populations, inhabitants of war zones, etc., and generally with the support of international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the OAS and others, as happened in the Jamaican case.⁶⁷

Over the course of about 15 years, Simpson has done extensive work spreading the word about capoeira throughout Jamaica, mainly in poor, outlying areas, in the countryside and in *Maroon* communities. He also joined the teaching staff of the Edna Manley College of Dance, where he was admitted after being recognized as a *master artist* by the college in 2013. There, for some years, he taught the courses "Capoeira I" and "Capoeira II" to students studying to become professional dancers.

As you can see, this work of promoting and teaching capoeira took off from the moment the German contramestre managed to establish contacts and partnerships with various organizations in Jamaica and abroad, also focused on working with this social segment. As Capacete confirms, it was from there that they got support, such as

67 See, for example, the introduction of capoeira in countries on the African continent: Rafael Lemos, "Brazilian teacher teaches capoeira in Central Africa", *Ge*, 13set. 2020,[🔗](#) ; "Brazil brings capoeira peace to Congolese", *Portal do Holanda*, 18 set. 2016,[🔗](#) . In an interview with [jamaicans.com](#) in 2008, Simpson lists the various organizations that collaborated with the project at some point: Organization of American States (OAS), Young Americas Business Trust (YABT), National Housing Trust (NHT), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Blue Star Jamaica Organization, Young Womens Christian Association (YWCA), Womens Research and Outreach Center (WROC). For the full interview, see [🔗](#)

air tickets to bring other capoeiras from Brazil, as well as to return to the country once a year, monthly financial support to maintain themselves, in addition to access to local infrastructure to carry out the work, with the endorsement of these prestigious organizations.⁶⁸

This partnership, which had the support of the Brazilian government, represented by the Brazilian Embassy in Jamaica, gave a boost to the work of spreading the practice. The presence of other capoeiristas from Brazil made it possible to enhance the teaching of capoeira by accompanying demonstrations with live instrument playing, making movement and music classes more dynamic, enabling the organization of events, workshops and more.

Figure 3

Pupils at a school in Negril, Jamaica, watch a performance by the group *Cativeiro* with the presence of Brazilian capoeiras. From left to right: "Carrapeta", "B1", "Capacete", "Fofinho" and Simpson playing



Source: Contramestre Simpson's archive.

68 Information obtained from an interview given by Mestre Capacete, via *google meet*, on March 22, 2024.

We can say that Simpson's initial idea that capoeira would "bomb" in Jamaica, becoming popular because of the historical similarities between the two countries, didn't come true. It has to be taken into account that, unlike Europe or the United States, Jamaica is not an attractive place for Brazilians, especially Brazilian capoeiras, who are looking to improve their living conditions by teaching capoeira.

The Euro-American attraction has enabled a continuous flow of capoeiras to these places since at least the 1970s, which was not the case in Jamaica. Of all the Brazilian capoeiras who collaborated with contramestre Simpson, none settled in Jamaica for as long as he did, even starting a family. Some spent between one and two weeks taking part in specific activities to promote the practice, such as *shows*, while others lived in the country for between one and five years. Later, some returned to Brazil and abandoned capoeira, while others continued with the practice and ended up settling in the United States or in European countries, as was the case with Capacete, now based in Rome, Italy.

Cultural mediation and strengthening black Jamaican identity

However, from the work started by Simpson, thousands of Jamaicans have had the opportunity to learn a little not only about capoeira, but also about Brazilian culture and history. Many others have been able to see and learn a little about Afro-Brazilian culture on Jamaican television, from the presentations given by the *Cativeiro* group, in articles published in newspapers, magazines, from interviews given on radio programs or even in public exhibitions in the most different parts of the Caribbean island.

Another aspect to highlight is the representation of capoeira in Jamaican newspapers. Three years after the arrival of

mestre Simpson, with some instructors already present, capoeira was featured in a full-page article in *The Gleaner*, Jamaica's second largest newspaper. On October 2, 2007, under the headline "Capoeira uniting youths with movement", the journalist Paul H. Williams gave his readers a general overview of the practice, listing its members in Jamaica, including Brazilians, instruments and movements. It also stated what capoeira was: "traditional African movements used by Brazilian slaves and quilombolas as a form of peaceful resistance against the Portuguese colonizers". According to the article, the Cativeiro group worked with young people in the outskirts of the city, using capoeira to promote peace and unity.⁶⁹

From the articles and notes published by the Jamaican press in contramestre Simpson's archive, it can be seen that the pioneers of capoeira in Jamaica did not deviate from the narrative thread commonly disseminated by capoeiras along with the practice in other parts of the world. In other words, Simpson and his companions spread the idea historically passed on orally by capoeira masters: that the practice is an Afro-Brazilian fight, created in Brazil during the time of slavery, used by blacks as a weapon of liberation against the oppressors of colonial society and, at times, identifying its place of origin, "the quilombos".⁷⁰

This hegemonic view of capoeira is widespread in Brazil and abroad to this day. In recent years, historiographical research has shown that the practice is something much more complex: it was originally an urban manifestation and not a rural one, or one that arose in quilombos; it was not only a struggle for liberation from the oppressed against the oppressor,

69 ACS, *The Gleaner*, "Capoeira uniting youths with movement", Kingston, Oct. 2, 2007.

70 See, for example, the interview given in 2010 by contramestre Simpson for a documentary produced by the Jamaican TV channel "PBC Jamaica", available in two parts at the [links](#) and [.42](#)

but also widely used by the oppressed against the oppressed, etc.⁷¹

Figure 4
Capoeira gains prominence in the Jamaican press



Source: Conrtramestre Simpson's archive.

It is also important to note that, as in other parts of the world where the practice has spread, along with capoeira, other manifestations have spread, such as samba, samba de roda, maculelê and puxada de rede. This is a characteristic that is practically common to all the places where capoeira has arrived.

The dissemination of capoeira and Afro-Brazilian culture more broadly in Jamaica by Conrtramestre Simpson can be understood through the lens of cultural mediation. The case of the German capoeirista does not fit the profile of a mediator directly involved in the creation or production of a particular cultural good, but rather that of a “promoter or popularizer” of certain goods, following the model proposed by Ângela de Castro Gomes and Patricia Hansen.

71 On this subject, see: Luiz Renato Vieira and Matthias Röhrig Assunção, "Myths, controversies and facts: constructing the history of capoeira", *Revista de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, n. 34 (1998), pp. 81-121, [↗](#)


Simpson acted as a cultural mediator by transmitting/teaching the Jamaicans black Brazilian culture, and in particular capoeira, theory and practice, which he had learned years before in Europe and Brazil.⁷²

As Gomes and Hansen also state, "cultural mediation practices can be exercised by a diverse set of actors, whose presence and importance in various societies and cultures is of great relevance."⁷³ Simpson's case may be relevant for discussing the role of white mediators who act as important allies in the dissemination of Black culture and even in the construction of a Black cultural identity. And in fact, when it comes to capoeira, this is not such a new reality - see, for example, the cases of mestre Camisa (José Tadeu Carneiro Cardoso) and Nestor Capoeira, two white capoeiras who have been spreading black culture for decades in Brazil and around the world, to name two examples.⁷⁴

According to the authors, such mediators have "enormous relevance in the construction of cultural identities of individuals and communities."⁷⁵

72 Angela Maria de Castro Gomes and Patricia Santos Hansen, "Apresentação" in Angela Maria de Castro Gomes and Patricia Santos Hansen (eds.), *Intelectuais mediadores: práticas culturais e ação política* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2016), pp. 7-37. For an approach to the trajectory of a capoeira as a cultural mediator, see: Pereira, "O mestre Artur Emídio de Oliveira", pp. 1-24.

73 Gomes and Hansen, *Presentation*, p. 9.

74 We are not discussing the presence of white people in capoeira, which dates back to slavery times, as several authors have pointed out, but the cultural mediation of white people, and in particular a white European, in the dissemination of this practice. On the presence of white people and the elite in capoeira, see: Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, *A negregada instituição: os capoeiras no Rio de Janeiro 1850-1890*, Rio de Janeiro: Secretaria Municipal de Cultura, 1994. Mestre Camisa is the founder of the Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira (Abadá-Capoeira), one of the largest groups in the world, with branches in dozens of countries; mestre Nestor Capoeira, already mentioned in this article, as well as being a pioneer in Europe, is a writer with several books published and translated into various languages. For more on them, see: ; 

75 Gomes and Hansen, *Presentation*, p. 9.

The teaching of capoeira—along with the full set of inherent and associated elements of Black culture, such as an Afro-centered oral history, reverence for Black masters and leaders both contemporary and those dating back to the time of slavery, learning of instrumental rhythms, drumming, Black songs, and the influence and proximity of other African-derived practices such as religions and samba—can lead practitioners to develop, or at the very least come closer to, a Black cultural identity.

In this sense, Simpson, a white European man, was an agent for spreading black Brazilian culture in Jamaica. His cultural mediation provided many Jamaicans, among other things, with access to a version of Brazilian history told from a Black perspective—the one he learned, largely through oral transmission, from his mestre, a Black man. It also allowed his students, as well as people who came across newspaper or TV coverage about the Cativeiro Jamaica group, to learn about or become aware of Black heroes and events related to Afro-Brazilian culture, such as Zumbi, the quilombos, and the entire Black pantheon of Brazilian capoeira masters.

This is revealed by the testimony of the aforementioned Tarik, one of Simpson's oldest students, a businessman with a university degree who had the opportunity to travel to Brazil before learning about the practice:

When I saw capoeira, I learned about history, I learned about culture, I learned about the black movements, the slaves who fought for freedom. And that part of the culture had a very strong connection with my experience as a Jamaican who also has a bit of experience [in] traveling to see the world and experiencing black life in other countries, so for me that part really impacted me and I felt a connection with capoeira."⁷⁶

This school of Black cultural formation that is capoeira, in addition to helping promote peace and unity among Jamaicans—one of the central goals of the Simpson/NGO project—was undoubtedly

76 Information obtained from an interview Tarik Perkins, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 28, 2019.

fundamental in encouraging and strengthening Jamaican Black identity itself, as can be inferred from Tarik's statement.

This stimulus came about, among other things, by giving Jamaicans access to other histories, experiences and practices of the African diaspora and by making it possible, through classes, talks, lectures, interviews, etc., to draw parallels between the cultures and histories of the two countries, with their particular black struggles and resistance.

This reference to capoeira's contribution to the construction and/or consolidation of a black identity is common to various places where the practice is rooted. As Matthias Assunção says, in contrast to the somewhat hegemonic nationalist discourse, recent approaches to capoeira with a transatlantic perspective have gained more ground. According to the scholar, with the globalization of the practice and "especially with its expansion in the United States, Afrocentric scholars and activists have discovered capoeira as an appropriate tool for promoting racial or diasporic consciousness among African-Americans."⁷⁷

In the case of Jamaica, although this was not the declared intention of Simpson or his Brazilian companions, the practice of capoeira itself certainly led to this result.

In addition to this ideological aspect, it is important to talk a little about the actual teaching of capoeira in Jamaica. From observing classes with two different set of students as well as events, such as a 'batizado' (belt-rewarding ceremony) held in November 2019, we can say that the didactics used are the same as those generally adopted in Brazil: the students listen to the explanation given by the mestre or teacher about the movement or kick to be learned, watch it being performed and repeat it with the aim of perfecting it through repeated execution.

The classes are taught in teams made up of a group of apprentices who perform the movements alone and/or in pairs, under the observation of the master who corrects the application of the moves and, after the end

⁷⁷ Assunção, *Capoeira*, pp. 24-25.

of the trainings session, the newly learned techniques are applied during the *roda* (capoeira circle). Teaching how to play the instruments follows the same model. The teaching of the other above mentioned black practices associated with capoeira, such as samba de roda, is also in line with the pattern developed in Brazil and spread by capoeiras wherever they settle.

In addition to the work done by Simpson, the role played by the Jamaicans themselves in consolidating capoeira in the country cannot be forgotten. As his apprenticeship developed, Simpson had the direct support of a number of Jamaicans who joined him in spreading capoeira throughout the island. Some of them form an effective nucleus of practitioners, helping with classes, making instruments, finding places to teach and maintaining them, attracting new students, promoting events, teaching capoeira to newcomers, exhibitions throughout the country, among other things.

The contribution of the Jamaicans was fundamental for the German contramestre to be able to enter territories that were difficult for a foreigner to access because they were areas marked by violence and conflicts between rival gangs. Some of these students became Simpson's right-hand supporters, dedicating themselves to the practice for many years, progressing through the capoeira hierarchy until eventually becoming instructors, teachers, and taking on the responsibility of teaching the practice on the island.

When he returned to Nuremberg by the end of 2018, already married to a Jamaican woman, Colleen Eckart, called Aruanda in the capoeira circles, and with two young children, the continuity of teaching capoeira in Jamaica was left to the Jamaicans themselves.

Instructors Ferro (Richard Murray), Baiano (Tarik Perkins) and Perninha (Rodane), along with Perna Longa (Kara Pessoa), Sereia (Kyrah White), Mar Azul (Phillip Llewellyn), Gameleira (Ushawn Rochester) and Quedinha (Francesca Gordon), are advancing

the work of the Cativeiro group in Jamaica, meeting weekly in downtown Kingston.⁷⁸

Training sessions bring together the oldest and most experienced, aforementioned Jamaican capoeiras, as well as newcomers. It is here that the practitioners of the Cativeiro group from outside Jamaica or from other groups passing through the city are welcomed. This core group meets from time to time to give presentations in public places, such as parks and squares, with the aim of spreading the practice and attracting new students.

Figure 5

Some of the oldest students in the Cativeiro group from Jamaica. On Simpson's left, Tarik; on the right, Rodane and Kara



Source: Contramestre Simpson's archive.

78 As you can see, contramestre Simpson reproduced the practice, common in Brazil, giving nicknames to students. The nicknames generally highlight a characteristic of the apprentice, seen by the mestre as peculiar, or a similarity to someone else, as in the case of the nickname "Simpson", already mentioned. The "Brazilian" nicknames show that Simpson, like those who promote capoeira around the world, uses Portuguese to teach, even though he is fluent in English and has mastered "patois", a Creole language widely spoken in the country.

The group has an Instagram page and a community on the WhatsApp messaging app. The Instagram page is not very busy, but the WhatsApp community is very active and is made up of both capoeiras from Cativeiro Jamaica and members of the group from other parts of the world, as well as one or two capoeiras from another group, in this case usually people who are going to or have been to Jamaica. The community is often used to summon students to classes or exhibitions and serves as a link between the Jamaican group and the rest of the world.

Cultural appropriation or black agency?

The trajectory of Contramestre Simpson offers a compelling case study for examining, through the lens of capoeira, the active role of the Black community in transforming so-called "Black culture"—once seen as an ethnic or marginalized expression—into a central component of national Brazilian identity.

Throughout much of the 20th century, practices such as capoeira, samba, maracatu, among others, were seen and presented as ethnic and local practices, in other words, a large part of society, the press and the state itself saw them as manifestations of the black and poor segments of society. Furthermore, these practices generally originated from and were known in specific places in the country, such as maracatu in Recife, samba de roda in Santo Amaro da Purificação or candomblé in Bahia, as Pereira suggests in his book *Rodas Negras*⁷⁹.

According to the author, the transformation of these ethnic and local practices into symbols of cities, states and the country itself was the result of a complex process that took place throughout the 20th century and involved, among other things: black agency, support from sectors of the intelligentsia, the press, authorities and the folklore movement, which was active between the 1950s and 1960s. This discussion also involves

79 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*.

the commodification of Black culture - the process by which cultural practices are turned into marketable products, a trend that intensified from the 1950s onward, particularly through their incorporation into the entertainment industry.⁸⁰

Conversely, the literature generally points to the transformation of capoeira—and other practices such as samba—from marginalized and repressed Black art forms to national symbols of Brazil as the result of “cultural appropriation”.⁸¹ For at least a few decades now, the proposition that black culture has been appropriated by the “elites”, the “bourgeoisie”, the “market” or the “state” has become common sense and has influenced generations in academia and, in particular, black movements. One of the works that has marked academic studies and these movements since the 1980s was the short text “Feijoada and soul food” by Peter Fry.⁸²

According to the eminent anthropologist, cultural goods “originally produced by blacks, were subtly appropriated by the white bourgeoisie and transformed into profitable institutions (both economically and politically).”⁸³ Along the same lines, both older and more recent scholars argue that Black culture is only embraced as national culture once its “profit potential” is recognized. When this happens, “its symbols and actors are whitened in order to facilitate commercialization. To make money, the capitalist places the white person as the new face of samba.”⁽⁸⁴⁾

As mentioned, this discourse is not restricted to the academic field; on the contrary, it is widely disseminated in society and circulates today on the most diverse channels of the most diverse social networks, being propagated by digital influencers who have millions of followers, as well as in television articles and the written press.⁸⁵

80 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*.

81 See, for example, Rodney William, *Apropriação cultural*, São Paulo: Pólen, 2019.

82 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 107-124.

83 Peter Fry, *Para inglês ver: Identity and politics in Brazilian culture*, Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1982, p. 52.

84 Djamila Ribeiro, “Cultural appropriation is a problem of the system, not of individuals”, *Azmina Magazine*, [s. l.], Apr. 5, 2016, [🔗](#)

85 See, for example: ; [🔗](#)

Undeniably, so-called black culture has been rejected, repressed and ridiculed for centuries, as Peter Fry himself and others point out.⁸⁶ However, as Pereira states, authors who advocate the idea that black culture has been appropriated "generally leap from the period when these cultures were rejected and repressed to the moment when they are celebrated and generate profits."⁸⁷

The simplistic explanation they give to solve this phenomenon is the idea of "cultural appropriation". However, to paraphrase Hermano Vianna, another author who has dedicated himself to this subject, there is a "mystery" to be solved in this problem, "the mystery of samba" or perhaps, as Pereira points out, the mystery of black culture in general. In other words: how did practices that were previously largely marginalized and seen as black become "Brazilian" and some of the country's greatest symbols outside and inside Brazil?

When we closely examine the trajectory of capoeira in particular, we see that not only its preservation but also its dissemination across broad sectors of both national and international society was not simply the result of *co-optation* or appropriation by the state, the market, or the bourgeoisie, as some scholars argue. Rather, it stemmed from the *agency of its own practitioners* throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.⁸⁸ In fact, the case of the transnationalization of capoeira is perhaps the most illustrative example of this.

It wasn't the state that promoted the spread of capoeira throughout Brazil in the 20th century. There is no evidence of this. Until the early 1940s, capoeira was included in the penal code. After it ceased to be classified as a crime, the state offered no incentives to promote it. Even the oral accounts of the old mestres refute this perspective.

86 Perry Hall, "African-American music: Dynamics of appropriation and innovation" in Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (eds.), *Borrowed power: essays on cultural appropriation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 31-51; William, *Cultural appropriation*.

87 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 110-111.

88 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 91-119.

The market, in turn, kept its doors closed for many decades. Capoeiras, through their own perseverance and efforts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, tried and succeeded in commodifying the practice, taking it to the rings, to shows, to the theater, cinema, television and abroad.⁸⁹

This 'media' exposure of capoeira and other black practices was fundamental for the transformational process of that time. Gradually, as Pereira points out, these practices ceased to be labeled solely as Black and began to be presented in newspapers, radio, and television as Brazilian—symbols of Brazil—aligning with the discourse of folklorists, intellectuals, sectors of the press, and certain authorities.⁹⁰

The "bourgeoisie" didn't appropriate capoeira; on the contrary, they were seduced by it. Who brought capoeira to the south of Brazil if not the capoeiras themselves? The famous Bahian mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado, 1889-1974), in this respect, has been singled out by critics for decades as the pioneer in teaching the practice to white students from Bahia's middle and upper classes, as well as for turning the practice into a commodity. Bimba was accused of whitening capoeira.

The eminent capoeira researcher Frede Abreu refuted this criticism, claiming that Bimba was actually interfering in the educational formation of those new to capoeira "with values from Afro-Brazilian culture", in other words, instead of whitening the practice, he was making the whites culturally black.⁹¹

Throughout the entire 20th century, capoeiristas taught the practice in vacant lots, neighborhood associations, mothers' clubs, and similar community spaces. This was not a matter of choice or a vow of poverty. On the contrary, because the practice was widely discriminated against, there was no clientele able to, for example, cover the costs of renting a space in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

89 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 91-119.

90 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 153-229.

91 Frederico José de Abreu, *"Bimba é bamba": capoeira in the ring*, Salvador: Instituto Jair Moura, 1999, p. 23.

Access to these places was the result of a slow process and the initiative of a wide variety of people who won over students from higher social strata, overcoming barriers and helping to dilute prejudices, as in the case of Mestre Bimba. They also established relationships and gained the support of more prestigious sectors of society, such as writers, journalists, intellectuals and authorities.

The career of mestre Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (1889-1981) and his efforts to promote capoeira angola are very illustrative in this respect, as Maurício Acuña analyzes. With the support of intellectuals such as Jorge Amado, folklorists such as Édison Carneiro and Bahian authorities, Pastinha was a key player in the revival and dissemination of capoeira angola, which was on the verge of disappearing around the mid-1950s.⁹²

The arrival of capoeira in Europe and the United States, without any support from the Brazilian state and as a result of the initiative of the most diverse capoeiras, reinforces the leading role of these characters, to the detriment of the elites, the state or the market. Take, for example, the trajectory of mestres such as Jelon Vieira, a pioneer in spreading the practice in the United States, or João Grande, who traveled around the world in folkloric groups in the 1970s, spreading the practice, and has been based in New York since 1990, where he maintains a capoeira angola academy.⁹³

It is worth noting that the entire process of market opening or expansion was not led by the market itself. It wasn't the market that sought out capoeira, it was the capoeiras who opened up new pathways, sought out students with the financial capacity to pay tuition fees and trainings spaces that were frequented by the 'elite' in order to teach there,

92 See: Maurício Acuña, *A ginga da nação: intelectuais na capoeira e capoeiristas intelectuais (1930-1969)*, São Paulo: Alameda, 2014; Jorge Maurício Herrera Acuña, "Maestrias de Mestre Pastinha: um intelectual da cidade gingada", Thesis (Doctorate in Social Anthropology), University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2017, .[DOI](#)

93 See: Maurício Barros de Castro, *Mestre João Grande na volta do mundo*, Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 2010.

as mestre Artur Emídio did, when he opened an academy in the south of Rio in the 1960s, targeting a more affluent clientele.

The trajectory of this Bahian mestre, from Itabuna, is illustrative for analyzing the slow conquest of the market - and, in particular, of the entertainment market by capoeiras. Artur Emídio was one of the people who, in the 1950s, took capoeira and adapted it for the stage, in countless theatrical shows in Brazil and abroad, showing it to thousands of people in various countries, such as Argentina, France and the United States, among others.

In the 1950s, shortly after television had been established in Brazil, he gave capoeira demonstrations, presenting the practice to the elites who owned television sets at the time. He took to the ring to defend capoeira as a national martial art, took part in films and gave several interviews to newspapers and magazines, always defending the appreciation and dissemination of capoeira. Mestre Artur Emídio, who died in Rio de Janeiro in 2014 in precarious conditions, denounced the lack of state support for the "Brazilian national martial-art" until the end of his life.⁹⁴

In other words, by focusing the analysis on the state, capitalism, whites, etc., the literature in recent decades failed to pay attention to the importance of the cultural mediation carried out by capoeiras, sambistas, terreiro people, among others, who made their culture accessible to more affluent social segments. Segments that were unaware of or had no direct contact with black culture because they didn't cross the social and racial barriers that separated them from the outskirts and slums of the cities, where these practices were cultivated.

The Bahian capoeiras are perhaps a notorious example of this process. Until the mid-1950s, it can be said that capoeira was in a period of decline in Brazil. Folklorists, some intellectuals and sections of the press denounced the possible disappearance of the practice,

94 On the master Artur Emídio, see: [.📄](#)

which had already become extinct in much of the country, remaining alive mainly in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro.⁹⁵

Various studies point to a turning point in this declining path from that same decade onwards, when Bahian capoeiras began to conquer the entertainment market in Rio de Janeiro, with their participation in folkloric groups, theater shows, films, trips around Brazil and abroad, as exemplified by the performance of the aforementioned mestre Artur Emídio de Oliveira.

These folklore groups in particular were fundamental in spreading Bahian capoeira throughout Brazil and the world. It should be noted that these groups were generally made up of holders of various black and popular practices, without any support from the state, who put on shows and practices such as capoeira and candomblé or maracatu, and presented them in the streets, squares, theaters, newspaper offices or TV stations. These groups made an immeasurable contribution to the spread of capoeira as a practice, because in many places they performed at, on or the other group member would stay behind - as has happened in São Luís, Maranhão, in the 1960s, for example - taking it upon himself to start teaching the art.⁹⁶

When analyzing Simpson's contact with capoeira and his learning, one can see that the German capoeirista was seduced by the practice. Brazilian capoeiras came to his continent and country to teach, to offer capoeira, to sell it as a commodity, certainly using the same model adopted by folkloric groups.

95 Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, p. 3- 27.

96 On black agency in the second half of the 20th century and capoeiras, theater and folklore groups in particular, see: Assunção, *Capoeira*, pp. 170-208; Pereira, *Rodas Negras*, pp. 153- 229; Roberto Augusto A. Pereira, "Teatro Folclórico Brasileiro/Brasiliana: teatro negro e identidade nacional", *Revista Transversos*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 20 (2020), pp. 216-238. On the case of the diffusion of capoeira in Maranhão, see: Roberto Pereira, "O mestre sapo, a passagem do quarteto Aberrê por São Luís e a (des)construção do 'mito' 'reaparição' da capoeira no Maranhão dos anos 60", *Recorde: revista de História do Esporte*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 3, n. 1 (2010), pp. 1-19, [↗](#)

The transnationalization of capoeira is an offshoot and part of the process of expansion, which began in the 20th century, of its practice in Brazil. Simpson, like countless capoeiras around the world, immersed himself in black Brazilian culture, consuming a package offered by the mestres, which went beyond the practice of capoeira alone. With capoeira, he has long been taught other black practices, such as Bahian maculelê from Santo Amaro da Purificação and samba de roda from the Recôncavo; a bit of Brazilian history, in particular that relating to black resistance to slavery; an oral history of a group of ancient and modern black leaders, ranging from Zumbi dos Palmares to various black capoeira mestres who are worshipped as true heroes, such as mestre Bimba, Vicente Pastinha, Besouro Mangangá etc.

This package offered together with capoeira has been marketed by capoeiras since at least the 1950s, when Bahian capoeira began to expand to the Rio-São Paulo axis, becoming part of theater shows that were increasingly popular at the time, intensifying its inclusion in the cinema and opening the doors to television broadcasts.

Overall, Simpson, like capoeiras from Europe, America, etc., was a consumer of this model of a spectacle spread by Brazilian capoeiras in the Old World, the United States and the rest of the world. The international spread of capoeira, without any support from the state, may be the clearest example that its transformation from an ethnic symbol into a symbol of Brazilian identity—both within Brazil and globally—was the result of the agency of the capoeiristas themselves, rather than appropriation by the state, the market, or the elites, as is often suggested in the literature on the subject.

From being a mere consumer of black Brazilian culture, the then young German capoeirista took a step further by constructing a capoeira identity for himself. Like those who adhere to the practice in the most diverse parts of the world, these consumers have contact with and the possibility of immersing themselves in elements of Brazilian black musicality, dance, martial-art, ritual and history.

Figure 6
Simpson, his wife Collen Eckart and their children Emma, Lukka and Lilli Eckart



Source: Dennis Eckart archive.

On this journey—sometimes without return—some lose themselves, while others find themselves; and even if they do not construct a Black identity for themselves, they at least develop a strong identification with Black culture. If they cannot be Black, nor carry the historical marks of the Afro-diasporic Black experience, they can still become, at least partially, culturally Black.

As Jamaican intellectual Stuart Hall puts it,

So instead of talking about identity as a finished thing, we should talk about identification and see it as an ongoing process. Identity arises not so much from the fullness of identity that is already within us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness that is 'filled in' from outside us, by the ways in which we imagine ourselves being seen by others.⁹⁷

97 Stuart Hall, "The question of cultural identity" in Stuart Hall, David Held and Anthony G. McGrew (eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures* (Polity Press: Open University, 1992), p. 288.

Identifying with black culture is yet another identity that these characters can build and carry with them throughout their lives or part of lives. Just as they carry with them other identities or identifications, such as that of Germans, women, Basques, Jews, scoundrels, etc.

When Simpson moved to Jamaica to teach Black Brazilian capoeira, unlike a “white person from the South Zone” or, in his case, a white European who appropriated Black culture in the generally negative sense attributed to the term, he went a step further: from being a mere consumer of this culture, he became an active agent in its international diffusion.

Along with capoeira, he taught the children of Trenchtown—Bob Marley’s neighborhood—a bit of Brazilian history from a Black perspective, as capoeiristas do around the world; in particular, he introduced them to Brazilian Black culture and resistance, something completely unknown to Jamaicans until then.

Far from being someone who plundered black culture or a profiteer - a connotation usually attributed when someone is accused of cultural appropriation - *contramestre* Simpson is perhaps best seen as an ally in the expansion of black culture and the anti-racist struggle. Beyond spreading Black culture throughout Jamaica, Simpson, through his agency and networks, enabled other Black and Afro-Indigenous Brazilians—such as the instructors Capacete and Mandinga at the time—to travel to Jamaica and assist him in promoting the practice.

Similarly, he assisted in expanding *Mestre Miguel Machado’s* work worldwide, including facilitating his trip to the Caribbean country to participate in events—with travel, accommodation, and fees covered—and to meet his newest disciples. In other words, even though the spread of capoeira in Jamaica was being led by a young white man, at the end of the day, black Brazilian culture was gaining ground.

Figure 7

Mestre Miguel Machado (1948-2024), founder of the Cativeiro group, gives a workshop on his second visit to Jamaica



Source: Contramestre Simpson's archive.

Despite living with him for more than a decade, the students of contramestre Simpson are unfamiliar with German culture. Through his classes, Jamaican children, young people and adults have learned about the similarities between the Brazilian quilombos and the Jamaican *maroons*, between Zumbi dos Palmares and Nanny of the *maroons*, the leader of the Jamaican resistance to slavery movement; they have learned about the old black masters of Brazilian capoeira; about the orixás, caboclos and encantados of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, who have similarities with the Jamaican *Kumina*, among many other things.

The experience of spreading capoeira throughout Europe and the United States has shown that, with capoeira, its agents spread the Portuguese language spoken in Brazil, as well as symbols, music, black references, history, all from an Afro-Brazilian perspective. The Jamaican case is no exception.

Final considerations

Based on the case of Simpson, a German capoeira contramestre, we discuss the transnationalization of capoeira towards Jamaica, taking as a parameter the expansion of the practice to the United States and Europe.

The case of capoeira's arrival on that Caribbean island has certain peculiarities on several levels. The flow of the capoeira movement was, and is, towards Europe and the United States: the aim is to conquer markets, clients, improve life; and the agents of capoeira's expansion are Brazilians. In the case in question, the direction was the opposite, towards the Caribbean; the protagonist was a German; the way to get the work off the ground was the support of Jamaican and international organizations, as well as the Brazilian government itself.

Jamaica is perhaps the exception that confirms the rule. In Simpson's case, although there was support from the Brazilian state, it is important to note that the initiative to spread capoeira in that country did not come from the Brazilian government. The support came after his arrival, at a time when capoeira was already recognized as a symbol of Brazil in the world, and when, belatedly, this black struggle was already in the process of being recognized as Brazilian heritage.

In this sense, we can say that, once again, the capoeiras themselves continued to take the lead. It was them who opened Jamaica's doors towards the practice. Similarly, just as there was no plan, support, or encouragement from the Brazilian state to promote capoeira within Brazil throughout the 20th century—in 1987, for example, Mestre Artur Emídio lamented in the *Jornal do Brasil* that nothing was being done for capoeira—there was likewise no incentive from the Brazilian state to take capoeira abroad.

Therefore, the idea that there was a Machiavellian plan by the elites, the market or the state to appropriate capoeira does not hold up

98 Abreu and Castro (eds.), *Capoeira*, p. 67.

against the evidence. The case of Jamaica affirms once again the fundamental agency of the bearers of black culture in the expansion of their practices.

As we have pointed out throughout the article, far from having appropriated capoeira, Simpson, like thousands of Europeans, was seduced by it from the moment he met it and had access to the practice as a commodity, offered by a black Brazilian owner who, on his own, left Brazil and ventured to teach it to young white Europeans.

Seduced, he was trained in black Brazilian culture and capoeira in particular, becoming, to a large extent at least, culturally black, given the enormous influence capoeira had on his life. In addition, from a simple apprentice, he became an ally in spreading capoeira and black Brazilian culture around the world and, consequently, an ally in the anti-racist struggle.

Finally, similar to what happens in the United States, where many

African-Americans see capoeira as a useful tool for promoting racial or Afro-diasporic awareness, as Assunção pointed out, in Jamaica, some of Simpson's older students, who were responsible for continuing the work in the country after his departure, emphasized the importance of the practice for strengthening an "African ancestry" or a "black identity", as Tarik Perkins points out:⁹⁹

I want capoeira to stay here in Jamaica, to become stronger, to really have a greater impact on the lives of children, especially because I think that nowadays that link with African identity, with black culture, is being attacked more and more by other influences from around the world, because globalization is real, you know, and there are a lot of things coming in, and I think capoeira could stay here and become stronger. It would be very good to really preserve that connection with black blood, black culture and African identity, which for me is very important, since [Jamaica] is a black country, with black leaders, which is not common outside of Africa.¹⁰⁰

99 Assunção, *Capoeira*, pp. 24-25.

100 Information obtained from an interview Tarik Perkins, Kingston, Jamaica, Dec. 28, 2019.

In this sense, it may be said that while in Europe capoeira has the potential to bring its practitioners closer to—or even make them admirers of—Afro-Brazilian culture, in Jamaica, a predominantly Black society, capoeira may also be cultivated as an important tool for strengthening Afro-Jamaican racial identity.

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Based on the case of Jamaica, this article discusses the transnationalization of capoeira, using the practice's arrival in Europe and the United States as a comparative reference. It also analyzes how the transnational spread of capoeira—carried out by its own practitioners—challenges the notion that Black culture was “appropriated” by the elites, the state, or the bourgeoisie. By examining the trajectory of a German capoeirista, Dennis Eckart, the article further supports the argument that capoeira, like other elements of Afro-Brazilian culture, was transformed from an ethnic symbol into a symbol of Brazilian national identity, due in large part to the agency of the Black community itself.

Transnationalization of capoeira | Capoeira in Jamaica | Black agency | Contramestre Simpson | Grupo Cativoiro Capoeira.

***BLACK AGENCY AND THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF CAPOEIRA:
THE CASE OF JAMAICA***

Taking Jamaica as a case study, this article explores the transnationalization of capoeira, using its spread to Europe and the United States as comparative reference points. It argues that the key agents of capoeira's global diffusion were its own practitioners, thereby challenging the widely held notion that Black culture was “appropriated” by elites, the state, or the bourgeoisie. Through an analysis of the trajectory of German capoeirista Dennis Eckart, the article further demonstrates that capoeira—like other elements of Afro-Brazilian culture—was transformed from an ethnic symbol into a symbol of Brazilianness, largely as a result of Black agency, among other contributing factors.

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