

Marks of Distinction in an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art

by Lauren Miller Griffith



A typical weekly performance event of the FICA group in *Salvador da Bahia, Brasil*.

If facing an armed adversary in a dark alley, there are many things you might want at your disposal...but a silk scarf probably wouldn't be at the top of that list. Yet for *capoeiristas* at the turn of the 20th century, silk scarves were an important part of their ensemble. The silk was believed to protect the wearer's neck from the straight razors that were a common weapon at the time. However, the meaning of an item of clothing may change over time, mirroring changes in the society in which the martial art is practiced.

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines music, dance, and sparring to music performed by a live orchestra. Although its exact origins are unlikely ever to be discovered, capoeira most likely developed as West African slaves and, later, free blacks intermingled on Brazilian colonial plantations and in cities. Because capoeira gangs, often armed with straight razors, were a public nuisance in the late 1800s, capoeira was eventually outlawed. After decades of seeking legitimacy, formal capoeira academies were opened in the first half of the 1900s.

After becoming legalized, capoeira developed into two different forms, each of which can be distinguished both by the style of play as well as the sartorial choices made by its founder. *Capoeira Regional* is typically played wearing a white uniform, bare feet, and a colored belt. When Mestre Bimba was developing the Capoeira Regional style in the 1920s and 1930s, he initially awarded students colored neck scarves to mark their advancement. He also codified the form and imposed a strict behavioral code on students. Within this context, silk scarves were no longer needed to protect capoeiristas from straight razors; however, they had become valuable markers of a student's level of achievement. The scarves have now been exchanged for colored belts that distinguish novices from more advanced students.

Dress often reflects a group's ideology and the differences between Capoeira Regional and *Capoeira Angola* are instructive in this regard. Capoeira Angola is explicitly nonhierarchical in how groups are organized and there are no visible markers of students' status. For training, most players wear black pants and a T-shirt, often with the group's logo on it. However, there are times when *angoleiros* wear special clothes. On some occasions, such as a public performance or special session in honor of a master's birthday or a holiday, players might wear all white. This has been explained to me in various ways. Some people say it symbolizes the white suits that men used to wear to church. It was a mark of a capoeirista's skill if he could play capoeira in his suit, avoid falling or getting dirty, and show up at church with no one the wiser about what he had done beforehand.

Others root the tradition of wearing white even further back in history, claiming that it dates to the era of slavery when slaves had to make their clothing out of flour sacks. Wearing white is a way of creating a symbolic link with those who are credited with inventing and preserving the art.

Questions for Further Study

What martial art uniforms are familiar to you? Describe one.

How do martial art uniforms reflect the values of the societies in which they are practiced?

How do uniforms reflect the beliefs of a martial art tradition?

What other uniforms for sport or work include symbols or colors that have cultural meaning for the wearer?



This image shows the typical day-to-day training uniforms of the *Estrela do Norte* group, pictured here at a workshop in Oberlin, Ohio. The author is in the front row, far right. Mestre Joao Grande is back center with the white cap, and Mestre Iuri Santos is on his left.



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Resource List

- Assunção, Matthias Röhrig. 2005. *Capoeira: A History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art (Sport in the Global Society)*. New York: Routledge.
- Capoeira, Nestor. 1995. *The Little Capoeira Book*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Downey, Greg. 2005. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Talmon-Chvaicer, Maya. 2008. *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance*. Austin: University of Texas Press.