

Capoeira, Its Value as ICH and the Open School Project: Experiences and Reflections

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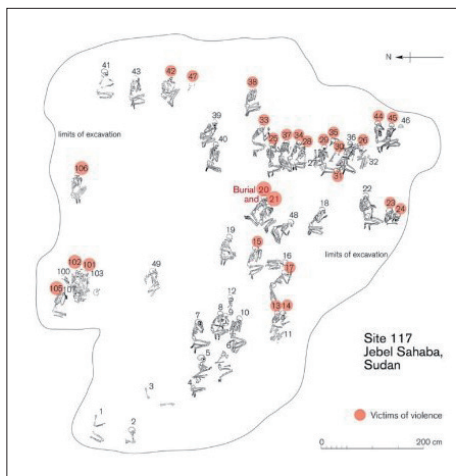
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CAPOEIRA: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Afrikan combat arts and sciences are the very oldest in the world as Afrikan people are the first human beings in the world. According to Hamblin, “the oldest discovered cemetery in the Nile Valley at Jebel Sahaba in Nubia (northern Sudan)—broadly dated to roughly 12,000–9000—provides the earliest evidence of tribal warfare, for roughly half of the 59 skeletons at site 117 had flint projectile points among the bones, probably indicating death in battle; some had evidence of multiple healed wounds, perhaps indicating repeated fighting” (2006, p. 32). This site has since been more accurately dated to between 13,140 and 14,340 years ago (Graham, 2016). At another massacre site at Nataruk in contemporary Kenya were found a mixture of people killed with blunt instruments, sharp pointed weapons, projectiles, and so on. According to Lahr *et al.*, “Ten of the twelve articulated skeletons found at Nataruk show evidence of having died violently at the edge of a lagoon, into which some of the bodies fell. The remains from Nataruk are unique, preserved by the particular conditions of the lagoon with no evidence of deliberate burial” (2016, p. 2). Researchers at Nataruk also found:



Map of cemetery 117 at Jebel Sahaba. The red dots indicate those who experienced a violent death © British Museum

five, possibly six, cases of sharp force trauma to the head and/or neck likely associated with arrow wounds, five cases of blunt-force trauma to the head, two cases of possible ante-mortem depressed bilateral fractures of the knees, two cases of multiple fractures to the right hand, and a case of fractured ribs. Only two of the skeletons in situ show no apparent evidence of peri-mortem trauma, although in both cases, the position of the hands suggests the individuals may have been bound at the time of death. (Lahr *et al.*, 2016, p. 5)

It is in the context of training for self-protection, and the protection of one’s family and nation that Afrikan combat arts and sciences were born. An early instance of such training can be seen in the tomb of imAxw Ptahhotep (Romano, 2007).

Traditional Afrika is replete with examples of training in combat arts and sciences for self-protection. It is within this context that capoeira, also known as *Kipura* in Kikôngo and *Engolo* in Kimbundu, was born in

Angola. According to Desch-Obi,

The techniques of the *engolo* closely resembled the fighting style of the zebra. The zebra’s combined ability for lethal kicking and nimble defense relate it to the practice of *engolo*. Neves e Sousa argues that the *engolo* was named after the zebra and that the kicks executed with the hands on the ground were direct imitations of the kicking of the zebra. These “zebra” or inverted kicks executed with the hands on the ground were the most distinctive and characteristic kicks of the *engolo*, as well as its American derivatives. (Desch-Obi, 2008, p. 38)



Wrestlers’ scene from the tomb of imAxw Ptahhotep (Romano, 2007)

From the mid-16th century, many Afrikans were enslaved by the better-armed Portuguese and taken to Brazil, and they took their combative skills with them (Desch-Obi, 2008; Kambon, 2018; Pakleppa *et al.*, 2013; Powe, 2002; Kent, 1965). In many instances, capoeira was repressed, as noted in the following passage from 1817 in which Police Intendent Paulo Fernandes Viana states:

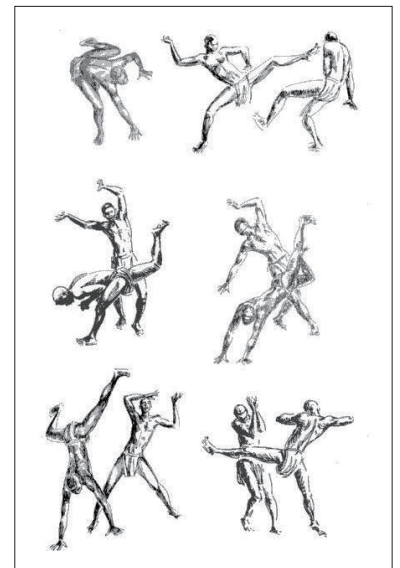
The same penalty [of 300 lashes and three months of forced labor] will apply to all those who roam around the city, whistling and with sticks, committing disorder most of the times with no aim, and which are well known by the name of capoeiras, even if they do not provoke any injuries or death or any other crime. (Assunção, 2004, p. 70)

According to Talmon-Chvacier (2008, p. 82), citing the publication *Cidade do Rio* of December 10, 1889:

Capoeira is the greatest evil the empire has bequeathed us. When the monarch’s police decided to suppress capoeira and imprison those who practiced it, the measures were always limited to signing a “promise of good behavior” and two or three days in jail. After their release, the Capoeiras were often recruited by the secret police.

This type of state repression and stigmatization continued until Juracy Magalhães, the governor of the State of Bahia, invited one of the capoeira *mestres*, Mestre “Bimba into the governor’s palace for a private demonstration of his Regional, somewhere around 1936” (Assunção, 2004, p. 136).

Assunção goes on to document the progress toward decriminalization as follows:



Engolo of Angola, as documented by Neves e Sousa (1965), featuring the Zebra-like inverted kicks

Decriminalization came soon in the form of a certificate that a teaching inspector issued on 9 July 1937 to Mestre Bimba, acknowledging him as a teacher of physical education and registering his academy in the Tororó neighbourhood with the Bahian Department of Education, Health and Social Security. ... The exhibition for the state governor, which had contributed to the institutionalization of capoeira on a regional scale, was later replicated on a national level. On 23 July 1953, Bimba met Getúlio Vargas, the ... then democratically re-elected President (1951–1954) [who] allegedly said on that occasion that “capoeira is the only truly national sport”. The nationalist discourse on capoeira had finally made it to the very top. (Assunção, 2004, p. 137)



Mestre Bimba (left) and Mestre Pastinha (right) (Parceiro, 2020)

Subsequent to the legalization of capoeira, another important mestre, Mestre Pastinha, “In 1949 ... finally managed to establish a center for Capoeira Angola, which was officially recognized in 1952” (Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008, p. 126).

Capoeira has since made great strides in terms of popular culture, appearing in movies such as *Cordão de Ouro* (1977), *Only the Strong* (1993), *The Protector* (2005), *Besouro* (2009), and *Undisputed III: Redemption* (2010) among many others and through video games such as the Tekken series (Eddy Gordo and Christie Monteiro) and *Street Fighter III* (Elena). As a result of greater sensitization through media as well as the on-the-ground efforts of many dedicated mestres and practitioners, huge capoeira groups with thousands of members have established a presence in countries throughout the world. Some of the largest include Abada, Cordão de Oro, Senzala, Muzenza, Axé Capoeira, and Capoeira Brasil. Ironically,

although capoeira is an art originating in Afrika, many of the largest groups are led by non-Afrikans and some cater specifically to non-Afrikans in Eurasia, Australia, North America, and other regions. However, one of the major strides in completing the circle has been the return of capoeira to Afrika, its true home and place of origin. Capoeira has a presence in Ghana, South Afrika, Angola, Senegal, Togo, Congo DRC, Côte D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and others. At the forefront of capoeira in Ghana has been Abibifahodie Capoeira, founded in 2009.

This chapter will discuss the role of Abibifahodie Capoeira (www.abibifahodie.com), as a propagator of capoeira as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through the recent UNESCO-ICM Capoeira Open School of 2019.

ABIBIFAHODIE CAPOEIRA (GHANA) AND THE UNESCO-ICM OPEN SCHOOL 2019: PROPAGATING CAPOEIRA AS ICH

Capoeira—like many Afrikan combat sciences throughout the continent and diaspora—has a natural way of combining dance-like movements with combat in order to enable better attack and defense (Assunção, 2004; Desch-Obi, 2008; Pakleppa *et al.*, 2013; Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008; Kambon, 2018). Capoeira combines physical (aerobatics, combat art, and dance), musical (drumming and singing), and philosophical elements (culture, ritual) related to the Afrikan=Black worldview. During the Open School, students learned the fundamentals of all these aspects, constituting a wealth of knowledge and skills transmitted from one generation to the next as encapsulated in the UNESCO definition of ICH. In this chapter, therefore, I will focus on capoeira and its value as ICH combined with my experiences and reflections as an instructor in the Open School project 2019.

In pursuit of relaying ICH, we set the following goals for the Open School project:

1. To develop a sense of community (for students to help each other as a group, train together and learn together).
2. To create a fun environment for learning the physical aspects of capoeira (relays, *roda* [capoeira circle], music, rhythm, and acrobatics).
3. To introduce Afrikan culture by teaching words, songs, stories, and philosophy of capoeira via engaging ways such as through music and videos.

MODALITIES FOR INSTRUCTION AS A MEANS OF INCULCATING VALUE FOR CAPOEIRA AS ICH

The instructional team was composed of myself Nana Kwame Pɛbi Date I (Obádélé Kambon, PhD), Kwabena Danso, and Nii Armah. Kwabena began training with Abibifahodie Capoeira in 2009, while Nii Armah began his training in 2015. We began the Open School by assessing the specific skills that the learners already possessed.

An additional pre-instruction assessment was performed to ascertain each individual student's openness to participation in capoeira class. We asked for those who had already heard of capoeira as well as those who may have practiced or seen it before. We also asked for those who had done non-Afrikan martial arts before. With specific regard to openness, we were looking for those who were already open to embracing the various aspects of capoeira, including (but not limited to) the physical, philosophical, and musical facets. As ICH also relates to instruments, objects, and artifacts, many of these were introduced to the students so that they would have exposure to some of the tangible aspects of ICH transmission.

There were significant outcomes from the Capoeira Open School within the six-week period from June 24 to August 2, 2019. The classes were structured to provide three routines, each of which accentuated physical, mental, cultural, and spiritual aspects. These were designed to accentuate the acquisition of capoeira holistically as ICH.

As part of the Asako Afrikan=Black Combat Capoeira instruction, students were taught to avoid the tendency to block kicks and punches. They were taught to evade these attacks to set up their own counterattacks, and in terms of outcomes, students were able to grasp this approach very early. Again, this goes back to propriety: doing the appropriate thing at the appropriate time. This is one of the core values of capoeira that is demonstrable in various other Afrikan combat sciences and arts. These are also the primary modalities of setting traps into which one lures the opponent with the overarching principle of attacking without being attacked. After having seen capoeira performed a few times, the learners grasped this principle and made it a part of themselves and their approach to Afrikan combat science. Thus, we were able to actually gauge and measure transmission of capoeira as ICH.

While these movements and principles were taught with teacher evaluation in mind, we also regularly included a portion toward the end of the class focused on self-evaluation and reflection—key components of growth and development in the internalization of ICH as



Okunini Kambon showing Capoeira films at Tema Royal School © Okunini Qbádélé Kambon



Okunini Kambon teaching Asako music and instruments in the Twi language at Nima Spread Out Initiative © Okunini Qbádélé Kambon



Okunini Kambon with students for the final demonstration in Nima © Okunini Oḃádélé Kambon

transmitted by us as facilitators. This ensured that students remained self-reflective, self-directed, and, therefore, self-motivated in their learning such that they would be able to correct any problematic movements, [anti]social behaviors, and/or unproductive personal attitudes.

In addition to the aforementioned outcomes, students were shown documentaries and short clips in which the history of capoeira was discussed as well as the ancient Afrikan combat arts and sciences (now commonly referred to as “martial arts”) as a whole (Pakleppa *et al.*, 2013). This initiative was designed to accomplish the goal of facilitating mental development as outlined in the specific objectives of the Open School, which is also commensurate with expectations of ICH transmission. The mental and spiritual aspects of capoeira were also highlighted through the students’ introduction to and participation in capoeira music sessions, using instruments such as the berimbau (single-string bowed instrument), agogo (cowbell), caxixi (shaker), reco-reco (notched scraping instrument), and atabaque (drum). The capoeira songs are significant in that they delve into the history and folklore surrounding the art and its origins. Introducing them during the Open School was intended to ensure the learners felt connected to their ancestors and ancestral art as passed down throughout the centuries—again, key components of ICH transmission.

Another outcome of which we are particularly proud is that we organized a final event in Nima on August 2, 2019 at which students from both schools converged to demonstrate what they had learned publicly. A major thoroughfare was blocked off after obtaining the

required permit. The occasion was graced by the assemblyman of the Nima area as well as other prominent religious figures and dignitaries. Han Changhee of UNESCO-ICM was also able to attend and even participate in the festivities. The demonstrations took several forms. From each site, we gave the most advanced students a routine of sequenced movements to perform. At the final program, they performed this routine with exceptional accuracy to the delight of the gathered crowd. We gave all the other students numbered movements that they were able to do on command when the number was called out. After this, students demonstrated their acrobatic abilities. This was followed by a light-sparring *roda* in which students from the two sites sparred against each other. A significant outcome was that we produced a final video highlighting the Capoeira Open School as a whole and the final event specifically. Students also received certificates, and those who did not get t-shirts in the beginning were given some by Han.



Okunini Kambon teaching children at Nima Spread Out Initiative © Okunini Ọbádélé Kambon

OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION OF ICH

Overall, my assessment is that the Open School produced successful outcomes in several ways, one of which being that it helped as a capacity-building initiative for students and for teachers who were open to learning alongside the youth. This was significant in that it has given students a chance to model themselves after adults with whom they have built a rapport of love and trust over a significant period of time. Further, it ensured that although the program has come to a conclusion, there is still an opportunity for the teachers to engage students during physical education classes and guide them with an understanding of what the children are doing as they continue practicing their capoeira. This has made a contribution to Afrikan children learning about arts from elsewhere in Afrika, thereby playing a part in the transmission of historical and cultural values.

It was specifically significant that girls were given an opportunity to participate alongside boys. This is consistent with UNESCO-ICM's expressed goal of contributing to youth and women's physical and emotional development and to improve leadership skills and community engagement through physical education methods and training. In the final analysis, this goal was attained via a structured and well-thought-out program as coordinated by Abibifahodie Capoeira specialists/instructors.

By way of assessment and suggestions, I am of the view that a final program such as the one that we organized in Nima on August 2, 2019 should form a regular part of concluding ceremonies for Open Schools conducted in the future. One reason for this is because it is directly in line with the goal of community engagement for ICH. Because the program was open to the public and, indeed, conducted in a public space that usually experiences heavy traffic (i.e., on an otherwise-busy street), the community was able to observe and even participate in the closing ceremony. This made community stakeholders feel like they were a part of the project and were not left out. Evidence of this was in the assemblyman's suggestion that we organize a Nima Capoeira Festival in which the main highway would be blocked off so that the entire community could participate in the training, classes, sparring *roda*, and other associated festivities. This type of initiative clearly would not have been suggested if everything had been done behind closed doors without community involvement and participation.

By the end of the Open School, we ascertained that students had come to understand the importance of stretching, warm-ups, and strengthening exercises. Further, they were able to do the *ginga* (the basic capoeira swing), *esquiva* (dodges, three different types), kicks (*martelo*, *bênção* direct kicks, and *meia lua* round kicks), acrobatics (*aû* cartwheel, *macaco* squat position, etc.). More than this, we were able to collectively build a sense of community by encouraging all to participate in the *roda*. These outcomes were evident at each school through the coordination of the program from its inception to its completion. It was also evident in the aforementioned final program, which brought the schools together so that learners could see that they were not isolated, but part of a larger community of learners. This was especially apparent in the final program where everybody played an important role in the circle, whether playing in the circle or making the music; clapping and

singing. As such, the Capoeira Open School 2019 was clearly in alignment with all aspects that define ICH transmission. I am certain that without the Open School, most, if not all, of the children would never have been exposed to capoeira, its music, its history, its theory, and its practice as aspects of the preservation and transmission of ICH.



Okunini Kambon with co-instructors Kwabena Danso and Nii Armah presenting certificates to Open School youth © Okunini Ọbádélé Kambon

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the third Open School in Ghana was an amazing success, as attested by Han Changhee, who was able to observe and even participate in the final program. Certificates provided to the youth certainly gave them a sense of pride and accomplishment in knowing that they were a part of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that was truly great. Both locations—Tema Royal School and Nima SOI—benefited greatly from the program as the student evaluations attest. The duration of the project allowed for significant progress to be made within a relatively short period of time. Undoubtedly, the Capoeira Open School was an experience that students will never forget. Although our budget was small, I am happy that we were able to take the resources allocated to make a successful impact on so many students across different locations.

I am certain that our objectives of teaching of capoeira as ICH (involving capoeira philosophies, cultural values/ethos, techniques, and related activities including the music and history) were met. Students demonstrated a significant improvement in their understanding of all areas taught. Further, their interest in and passion for capoeira have certainly been enhanced by the overall experience.

In sum, the 2019 Open School was definitely an amazing success and we look forward to continuing our work with UNESCO-ICM in the accomplishment of its goals and the fulfillment of its mandate for the betterment of Afrika and beyond for the preservation of our unique and underrepresented ICH in the area of combat arts and sciences.

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