

CAPOEIRA ON THE PERIPHERY

an interview with mestre nô

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A true master of masters, Mestre Nô, aka Norival Morreira de Oliveira, can count thousands of students in a dozen countries who are under his guidance. He is the president, founder and Grand Master of *Capoeira Angola Palmares*. Born in 1945 on the island of Itaparica off the coast of Bahia, he lifelong devotion of capoeira began under his grandfather. His devotion to capoeira began in earnest when he was seven, when his family moved to the Massaranduba neighborhood in Salvador, well known for its rich African influences. Influenced by the many great capoeiristas around him, and weekly street rodas that attracted Capoeiristas from around Salvador, Nô soon attracted the attention of Mestre Nilton. He founded his first capoeira academy in 1964.

**Q: How does someone become a Master?
Is it in your mind, your body or ...?**

To graduate a student is not to brainwash someone, but rather to direct the student to the right path. You need to check the students condition because they always have that question in their mind, "How am I doing? How can I get there?". In my case, the first graduation represents a number of movements that the beginner, as well as the senior, will do repetitively in their games. These basic movements are used even by the most graduated students who will use them too in a certain way to set up the less advanced student. Watching the behavior in the roda, and the development of the knowledge of the art of capoeira is important.

For a master to graduate the students, he has to be perceptive and understand the student, and understand that the student will not have the same perception as he. A master realizes that things don't happen that fast. I have a lot of critics, but I don't care, because when people criticize in a positive way, I listen and might change. I just wrote a song



about when I left my hometown. "My mother said be careful, this world is very tricky, listen to everything, do not wait for the sunrise". The more we have time in life, the more we have to learn. You are going to graduate people but you are always going to be learning too. For the students, at the same time that you graduate, you will have to work on your behavior as well as the fundamentals, and the movements — putting it all together is the tricky part, in the right time. How are you going to acquire all these things? The musical side, the instrumental side, everything.

when you get to the point where you can compose a songs and compose movements. At the higher graduations, we have four steps to become a master because the closer you get, the more you have to learn, the more people will expect from you. People say I'm very grumpy, always expecting the best but that's because I want to do the right thing. The way of life today, students want to learn a little bit and then pass on to the next graduation in a short amount of time. They don't have patience — sometimes the person is very sloppy but he already wants the higher level.

My father was a police officer, but I wanted to become a Capoeirista, ever since I was 4. My grandfather introduced me to capoeira. I sacrificed myself and the way I learned was in the roda not in an academy, on the street because the only two schools at that time were Mestre Pastinha's school and Mestre Bimba's school. People used to hang out and learn from student to student, go to backyards and train. Now there are so many schools it is difficult for the master to teach every single students. It's like trying to go to a village and vaccinate everybody — now you just give it to the leader and hope that's enough.

"I sacrificed myself and the way I learned was in the roda, not in an academy."

Q: Is there a big issue that is problematic to capoeira in Brazil and around the world?

There are various problems. One of them is the characterization of the movements. Especially the movements, fundamentals, behavior, generally. I believe that Capoeira hasn't grown up, it's swollen. As a matter of fact, that is the reason it isn't working very well. But problems are part of any art evolving.

Q: When you mention about the swollen aspect of capoeira is it related to the people who aren't qualified teaching capoeira?

Of course. There are not well prepared people without credentials teaching capoeira everywhere. They take a plane and wherever they land, suddenly it is as a master and the graduation happened somewhere in the air. This is especially true of the capoeiristas who perform in the big folkloric shows from Bahia who travel and wherever they go, they become masters. And then there are a

large amount of people from Rio and Minas Gerais and they get here and see that it's financially more profitable to teach here, and they start to teach. They are totally unprepared but they call themselves masters. They get a couple of students and start teaching, but then they run out of things to teach, and then they graduate people. And then there are a lot of masters who sell themselves and say "My student is in the US", and they go there to do workshops and make money that way — and consequently they support this system and these people that way. By doing this they just confirm this "fictional" master status so they can make money every year. People have good intentions by doing this, but

they aren't working with the truth, the reality of the capoeira art. In my case, I'm really grumpy with the students because I don't allow these things to happen.

Q: How do you see the development of capoeira in Brazil today and in the world?

Capoeira has become a fashionable thing to do. In Brazil, because of the media — you have started to see it in soap operas and things like that. The upper middle class boys and girls started to embrace it because of school programs, then these playboys started to pump iron and become "tough guys" by practicing capoeira and it started to make the girls look good. These people have money and they could bring teachers into their clubs and neighborhoods — it became a fashion. In Europe and the US the fashion is related to the necessity to travel to Brazil and learn the art, especially because the art has connection to Africa because Africa is the mother land and is very respected in the world. That is the real intention of foreign people to learn the art, it's something different. But pretty soon they realized they have to drink the water at the source, in Brazil.

Q: What is your opinion of some contemporary Capoeira groups that they do not just practice Angola, but Regional as well? What do you think of the unification of Regional and Angola?

For the way I see things, rat is rat, cat is cat. I am still a little radical about this issue, I feel that whatever you try to do, learn the fundamentals. Learn

according to the fundamentals required by the art form. In Capoeira Angola, we have a skeptical side — each group looking at things in their own reality. But it can be a nice family where we live in harmony, there is no doubt about it. We can live in the same neighborhood, each one in his own house, and we can visit each other. I eat your food, you eat my food, but when it is time to go to bed, each person goes home to their own house.

Q: So you are trying to say that Angola is Angola, and Regional is Regional?

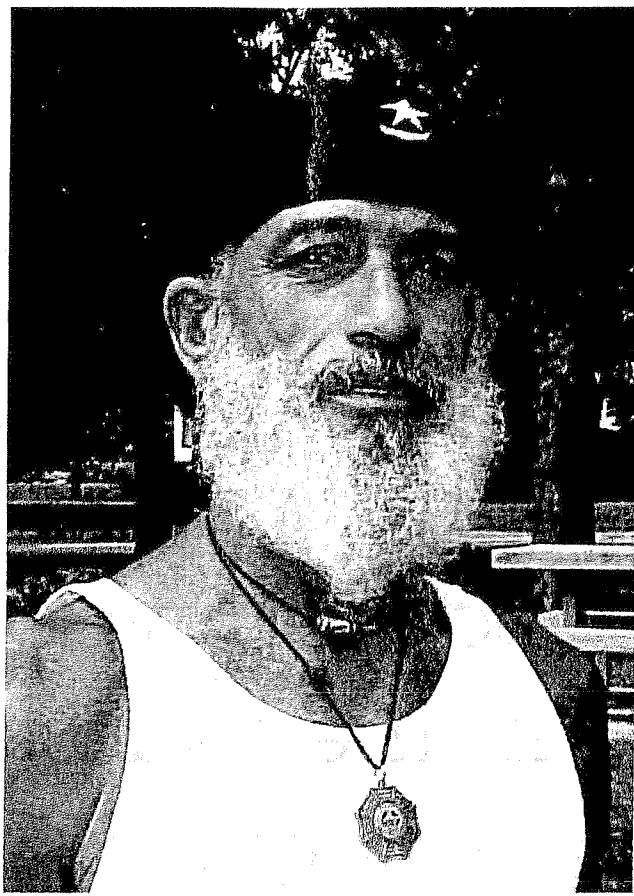
Exactly. Cat is cat, rat is rat.

Q: What is the difference between Angola and Regional?

Capoeira Regional is the bridge between Capoeira Angola and the new generation. Mestre Bimba, was supported by certain people. He felt the necessity of

taking the best parts of Capoeira Angola, and with the movements of Batuque and Luta Livre, he created the Regional style. Capoeira Angola developed along with Mestre Pastinha, but both had schools in the historic area of Salvador. This was where all the tourists used to go, and they used to see Pastinha's school where they emphasized the tricky movements and not the aggression, very little related to the violence. Now, at Mestre Bimba's school there were no tourists. The training sessions were behind closed doors. The classes there were training the fighting skills for keep.

So then, where was the real Capoeira? Because the historic district was like a supermarket — you could find everything there. The tourists go and see everything, buy crafts, and then they are gone. They



never ventured out into the surrounding areas. Now the surrounding areas, that's where the reality of life is — the struggles, where all the other capoeira schools were — Mestre Waldemar, and many others. All the surrounding areas of Salvador had their own capoeira schools. Pastinha had the beautiful show for the tourists. And the tourists could never see Bimba's Academy. And the tourists didn't go to the surrounding areas because people would tell them they'd have their camera stolen there, and have other hassles to deal with. So they never saw the real capoeira. It was the black people struggling to fight against the struggles of life, oppression, and all kinds of negative behaviors, to fight against the police. There were different tactics and strategies of training to exactly work against all these things. That was when you could see the tough rodas, including the use of razor blades and weapons.



Q: Do you think the free and spontaneous capoeira always used to be in the periphery of Salvador?

Nowadays you don't see these kinds of rodas anymore with tough capoeiristas, with tough games. People started to feel the necessity to go the center, for the big groups to leave Brazil and embrace the world. Now a new era is starting, and because capoeira has a Brazilian face, it represents its way of life, it is full of strategies, changes according to the situations like a chameleon. For example, people join these big groups, graduate, and then leave the country, make money, then return to the periphery and open their own schools, which is a good thing, very smart. But on the other hand the knowledge and depth of the game ends up being weak. The financial side has started to speak louder than the knowledge. And then their Masters started to accommodate this behavior, because they can get a piece of it too, and they lose sight of the knowledge also — thinking about money unfortunately.

Q: Do you think that when the Capoeirista travels and returns, isn't he not helping his neighborhood?

Yes, of course it is a good thing, but only if they really seek out the best information to learn the fundamentals of the art to teach. But so many become impatient and think because they have money, they don't need tradition or fundamentals. But who am I to change the world.

Q: How do you see your Angola style? What is it?

Capoeira is there — I don't have Capoeira Angola, I am a part of it.

I have my own philosophy. Capoeira in the roda, capoeira in your life. 95% of the Capoeiristas don't understand why they practice capoeira, why the capoeira in the roda

is the same capoeira you use on a daily basis in your life. Some will say "I practice capoeira to fight, to defend myself against three or more people". Others say "to look good, have a fit body", others say "to fill my empty space in my life". Or because their friend does it, their girlfriend does it, they go along and might as well do it also. These are the types of answers that aren't the reality of capoeira for my point of view.

In the beginning I accept all these points of views to join capoeira, but then I try to weed them out. In the sense of directing capoeira in order for them to use it in their life. Always bringing up strong examples of it, inside the school and outside as well in order so that I can see when the student is getting hooked into this knowledge or not. I give some time, and let it go, later on they'll feel the necessity of learning — how they should behave, because they don't want to waste their time, learning something that will not bring him fulfillment.

In order to just become a strong person physically, you can join a gym, you don't need capoeira for that — just do some aerobics, or run on the beach. In order to fight, go learn jui jitsu or some other martial arts specific for fighting skills, capoeira has a lot of wisdom — it is the fight of the oppressed against the oppressor. Related to all these aspects, they had the way of learning in the roda to survive on the streets. In the moment that you leave your home to go to work, to travel, everywhere you go, even in the US it happens the same way, sometimes you go just thinking about what bus or train you are going to catch, and then you forget everything around you, suddenly not even seeing a car coming right at you. So you don't have the wisdom, the malicia, to face all these aspects at the same time. Observe, understand what is around you. You catch a bus in Brazil, and the bus is crowded, people will steal your watch or wallet if you don't pay attention. You'll be totally unprepared if you don't think about all these issues that you will face when you leave your home. In capoeira, you learn to be aware, learn how to see without looking. We learn how to smell without sniffing, how to talk without saying a word. You gain a particular malicia, of how to interact with things, to be alert.

On one occasion, I was asked at the University of Sao Paulo, a student graduating with a degree in physical education, asked me "Mestre, wouldn't you be stressed out by being alert 24 hours?" He didn't understand that at the same time a capoeira has to be relaxed, not tense. Listen — when you are in your natural state of mind you are relaxed. My attention doesn't become tension, simply because that is my nature, the Capoeiristas nature. It's like you hurt and felt that profound pain, but you have

to survive and get used to, and naturally it becomes part of your existence.

The combination of capoeira and life is how the master will pass this knowledge on to his student, this paradox. The Capoeirista has to seek and find this magic way of life and transform what they learn in the roda into their daily life. Because there are two different sides of capoeira and of life — the negative and the positive, and then there is the knowledge of how to navigate this. Only if you come from a really good master will you get this paradox. You hold onto the negative side, but use the positive, but you need to be aware because you might have to use the negative side.

"I have my own philosophy. Capoeira in the roda, capoeira in your life."

When I was a teenager I was very brave and never feared anything, I always used to ask myself, back then in my youth, I brought it to a master who used to tutor me, "Master, what should I do if I get into a fight on the street? Should I do a chamada?" Yeah, you can always do it with the right people at the right time. As for the rest, time will tell. If you stop along your path of life, you stop learning.

Time has taught me all this wisdom, my students have it easier, they have a master to break it down. I was illiterate, my masters were worse off than me. I transformed my life through the capoeira aspect. A chamada is from someone who is weaker than you, but they call you, they seek to entrap you. Because the one who calls you wants to catch you. The person who is calling you is trying to set you up, so you have to approach with caution. Why do you close yourself as you approach? Because you can be attacked if you are to open. That is the opportunity

for the person to take you down in the game. So you step two steps forward and two steps back like you are dancing and the person who made the call will signal it finished. If he didn't get you when you approached, he can catch you as you go, so you still have to be aware. You always have to be aware wherever you go — chamadas happen all the time. When you think everything is cool, that's when the danger happens.

Any kind of Capoeirista has to learn Portuguese — it's a responsibility to learn all these things. Because when they go to Brazil, they are the ones who have to interact. I rent my place out so my teachers in America can bring their students here. It's an empty house in a poor neighborhood — that's the way it is. I can't be with them 24 hours, they have to learn how to relate with other people.

Mestre Bimba attracted the wealthy kids who had had their asses kicked, and they saw Bimba's Regional style. When I teach a workshop I show Bimba's Regional style. I teach it as realistically as I can, to show what it is. To show Capoeira Regional, what it is and how it works. But the Regional "lifetime" is shorter than the Angola — it requires so much more fitness.

Capoeira Angola is divided, it has different sides. It has low movements on the ground, up and down, and playing standing up. The standing up style is the technique that Mestre Bimba took, from that he created the Regional. Pastinha took the slow movements and the low game and developed from there. Nobody goes to the periphery. They embrace these more theatrical aspects of capoeira.

Q: What is the difference you have seen in Capoeira Angola over the last 50 years?

Of course, I see differences. I noticed the different forms of teaching and behaviors of the Angoleiros. But it could be different because times change, life changes. We are in a different era. In a certain way there was a good change, and on the other side very radical change. We have to move on without losing the roots of the art.

About Capoeira Angola Palmares

Mestre Nô is the president and grand master of Associação Brasileira Cultural de Capoeira Palmares. The ABCCP was started by Mestre Nô in 1980 and is an organization dedicated to teaching, promoting, and maintaining the traditions of Capoeira Angola. The educational aspect of this organization is referred to as Grupo Capoeira Angola Palmares. This group now has chapters across Brazil with many thousands of members, many are youths and adolescents for whom capoeira has become an anchor and community support against poverty, offering these children in-roads into education and valuable life skills.

In recent years Capoeira Angola Palmares has expanded outside the borders of Brazil, with groups now in Israel, Moscow, Austria, England and the United States. Mestre Nô spends six months of the year traveling to capoeira groups across the globe, teaching and sharing his experience and wisdom of the art and traditions of capoeira Angola.



In Memoriam **Lozemil Machado**

...almost ten years gone

Lozemil Machado

was a Brazilian capoeirista who, along with Mestre Jelon Vieira, first brought capoeira to the United States in the 1970's.

Lozemil was a student of Mestre Nô and his energetic performances in the New York area was said to be an influence on the beginnings of break dancing. Whether or not this is true, Lozemil is an important figure in the history of capoeira in the U.S. Lozemil passed away in March of 1994.

His influence on capoeira will never be forgotten.