

**Interview with Cristina Nascimento Dias dos Santos
Rio de Janeiro in march 1999
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Introduction:

Cristina Nascimento Dias dos Santos began with Capoeira Angola in march of 1993. She participates in the Capoeira Angola Ypiranga de Pastinha nucleus¹, led by Emanuel Lopez de Lima. She lives in Rio de Janeiro and works as an educator of children. Nowadays she is the only contramestra living in this city.

How did you begin to train in Capoeira Angola?

I started with Capoeira Angola because I began with a therapy which included elements of Capoeira, called Somatherapy². It is a therapy which utilizes Capoeira in the therapeutical process. I sought out mestre Neco (Rio de Janeiro) on a day in which he was giving classes. He obliged me at first to observe so that he could find out my intentions.

What was the name of the group?

During that time he formed part of G-CAP -Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho, led by mestre Moraes.

When did that take place?

In march 1993. I spent approximately six months of training with mestre Neco after which he took a break, not knowing for how long. So I started training with Manôel. I knew him from before, as they had been sharing the same space. Manôel gave lessons on different days than mestre Neco. When mestre Neco started his classes again I had been training with Manôel for some time and so continued with him. I immediately fell in love with Capoeira. I finished the therapy and disligated myself completely from it, realizing it was in fact Capoeira which brought the profound transformation I was looking for in my life. It was through Capoeira that I really began to know myself and to change in all levels: culturally, personally and in my relationships to others.

Did many people from the therapy continue with Capoeira like you?

It is rare and even more difficult because it means being with a mestre. People question the authority of the mestre. When I started there where many people in the therapy, at least twenty people were participating in the group. One of the few persons from the therapy that continued with Capoeira was me, I really integrated into Capoeira.

¹ nucleus means a group that trains several times a week, which is traditionally led by a mestre, contramestre or treiel. It aquires a regular participation, which may include social or cultural activities.

² Somatherapie was founded by Roberto Freire. It usually takes one year and is offered in many vig cities of Brasil. The therapie includes a membership in a group of Capoeira Angola.

An important question in the work with Manôel is the cultural reinvindication of civil rights³. Can you give me your vision or opinion on that issue, opening a political context?

Manôel works in a way that means really going into the ghettos in order to get the people involved.

What is the ghetto? Is it the same as the favelas?⁴

It refers to the communities that lie on the margens of the big urban centers⁵. The people living in these areas are marginalized from the opportunities which are offered in the big urban centers. In these places Manôel tries to do a very educating work in the sense that he strengthens certain elements with which the people working in these groups can focus on while at the same time living in community with others, and thereby percieving another context apart from the social environment that they usually live in. Whenever there is an event in whatever part of Rio de Janeiro Manôel tries to take the children there because he is working mainly with children in these communities. In this way he tries to show a different side that exists. Moreover he talks about our culture, the importance to preserve Capoeira in itself, questions of racism and the prejudices that people are living all the time in our society. All that enforces the elements to reach the reinvendication of civil rights. We start to reconsider our rights, our actions in the city, our search for a space of existence in this society, to make us visible. What happens is that we often stay inside of the ghetto and believe that this is our world, the world that we have a right to. For most of these people the ghetto is the only space of their own. It is important that they appreciate this space as a space where they live and survive for many years, that they even appreciate this space as culture, but perceiving that there are other spaces where they have a right to be.

Is Capoeira a form of rediscovering space in society? Is it discover or rediscover?

I think it is discovering if you take the individual life of a person and rediscovering when you look at the person as a member of society. From birth on the person has this right, only it has never been made clear. Maybe the person has heard about this right various times, but she has never experienced it. So I think in this sense it is rediscover, for it is something that already belongs to her since she was born. But as she has never experienced it, she considers it as something new.

In a different conversation, you pointed out that through practicing Capoeira you experienced a mayor personal change. A personal change which you feel in your daily life, because Capoeira touches the inside of a person. Can you say something about this aspect, how Capoeira brought you a new identity, a reinforcement of your self-confidence and helped you to get through your life?

³ People practicing Capoeira Angola often transmit political values and goals which are close to anticolonial and antiracist conscience.

⁴ Favelas are often situated close to the morros. The rich live at the seashore and the poor expand over the hills.

⁵ The restructuring of the urban space in the metropolitan cities and the hereby connected segregation process is taking place also in the economic and trade- centres of the "third world countries". The capital and the higher income- classes are concentrated in the centres of the cities, poverty is banished to the peripheric city- zones. Poverty and marginalisation is related very much to the coloured population, which has to organize its existence far away from white prosperity in the suburban areas of the big cities.

It is exactly what I feel. Capoeira Angola helps me to really live, struggle in daily life. She helps me in various senses, for example physically, because the difficulties of everyday life weigh upon my back and we take a physical attitude that is very heavy. Capoeira helps me with the whole movement. When you look at it in a broader sense it is not only the physical movement but the mobilisation that she brings internally and spiritually. She gives me more ease to lead my life, this daily struggle. She also helps me to jump over the prejudice of my life. I know about the history of family education, but I also know about the history of blacks in Brazilian society and about the lack of visibility of blacks in society. We always feel pretty invisible. That also has its psychological effects.

I used to be a much more retired person, much more closed up than I am today. I was much less talkative, thinking that I was ugly and having many inner complexes, but I was successful in reconsidering and turning around these values, because in Capoeira we hear a lot about the history of African people. Things that we never hear in school and do not see on television. In Capoeira we see many black people taking control of their lives and transforming them. You start to look out for this inside of yourself. Other people have accomplished this transformation saying: "Watch out, you are beautiful. Look how many black people, how beautiful they are." And you hear that a lot, much more in this world where people admire and respect black people than outside of this world. In school I suffered a lot from prejudice of my teachers and colleagues. They gave me names and all the things the whole world knows already, calling me monkey and ugly. And you run around with that in your head thinking it is all true. So when I got into Capoeira I heard the opposite, I heard an enforcement of my self-esteem, and I am absolutely convinced that this was fundamental for growing in this direction, to make this salto possible. Capoeira gave me the elements to reinvent this self-esteem, reinvent my identity. Before I began training in Capoeira I knew little about it, only seeing it a couple of times in the streets or on television. It was something that always touched me, I stopped to watch. When I started observing the classes of mestre Neco - first he let me only observe during three classes - I was charmed. I stayed from beginning to end, not practicing but participating mentally, sitting in the circle, the roda, singing and observing all the games. It was something for which I immediately felt passion.

I have a friend here in Rio practicing Capoeira for many years. She is black and in a recent discussion explained to me that she could never imagine to take lessons in Capoeira with a white person because they (the whites) lack origin and identification. She perceives Capoeira as something of blacks, and only a black person can transmit the feeling of oppression and the identification of the struggle for liberation. How do you consider this question?

I already talked about the prejudice and how it was for me to live with it in society. In the same manner that I experienced it for myself I know that I also have this prejudice, but I do not want it in my life. Not taking classes with a person only because he or she is white would be a form of reinforcing this prejudice. It is logical, if you look at Manoel -who is a black person-, carrying out his work, saying things that are strong for him, it is obvious that I identify with it because I'm living it myself. I can't deny that!

But I also think when you are giving lessons as a teacher of Capoeira Angola, which is a cultural manifestation of black origin you have to instrumentalize yourself. What is the meaning of self-instrumentalisation in this case? It means knowing more concerning black culture and knowing more concerning what it means to be a black person inside of the culture of Capoeira itself. In your work you have to have the preoccupation to pass this knowledge along to others, no matter if they are black or white. Of course Manoel is going to talk about these things with a much more emotional burden, because he lives it. This difference cannot

be denied. This difference has its weight, but with this affirmation of your friend we will only limit and reinforce this prejudice.

If my dream were to do classical ballet tomorrow...

As a child of four, I had much passion for dancing. I watched dancing on television, and my mother said, "But you like a black cannot do ballet, the people will not want to watch you, you will not be able to do it." It was said out of ignorance, but at the same time to protect me. It hurt me deeply. It would be the same if I were to say tomorrow, "But you as a white person cannot practice Capoeira, and could never become a teacher". I think this would hurt the person in the same way that it hurt me back then. When my mother said this, I gave up simply because of a prejudice. With these limitations, these things will forever remain divided, without the possibility of exchange and discussion. I believe if a person has gone through such racial prejudism within society -"the prejudice of being black"- he or she has more of an idea to speak about this history, as someone does who has never lived it.

You participate in a group which maintains the traditional line of mestre Pastinha. In the history of Capoeira Angola it is common that the nucleus are lead by men. Nowadays there are many female participants. You as a black woman are not only suffering the results of racist prejudice, but also from the prejudice of being a woman who participates in Capoeira. The struggle for liberation always has to be interdependent with the social reality of a person. Is the question of sexism taken as important as the question of racism? And the second related question, in which sense could this struggle be included in Capoeira Angola?

Capoeira is a movement which is engulfed in a whole social context. In a certain historical timeframe women did not take part in the practice of Capoeira Angola. But what Capoeira is in and of itself, the movement and spirituality, does not exclude the effective participation of women. That they did not participate has been and is a consequence of a social context into which the woman is inserted. I do not believe that when a woman leads a group it hurts the principals or fundamental aspects of Capoeira Angola. It is connected to a general context, something much more amplified.

My case is to be a single mother, which is very common in our country. Being a single mother is to be considered the head of the family, because it is she alone who raises the children. The man who is the father of my child, is not a companheiro who is with me as part of my daily life. Two months after my son Lucas was born I came back to train, because my mother lended me support. If it were not for my mother, I would have had to stop or train at home. I believe that this happens with a lot of women; they have to completely stop because they do not have someone who takes after the children.

Moreover, there exists the history that you encounter a world which is essentially masculine, with its proper structures and organisation. The first difficulty to overcome is to believe that you can accomplish the same thing as a man. I came to the roda, I observed the orquestra, and the grand majority of the people playing berimbau were men. I thought that I would never be able to play berimbau. We organised a roda of women, and we saw women playing berimbau -including gunga- something that women are generally hesitant to take up.

When I started practicing Capoeira there were only a few women who took hold of the berimbau in order to play and it was the same thing that we came and tried to play the instrument and they looked at us like, "Look at that woman, so you know how to play?" It is normal, that the people pass the instruments to those who know how to play, but the fact of being a woman should not be the first hindrence, but the fact that either you know how to play or you do not. It is important to create possibilities where the prejudices of everybody are reflected. The men were educated in this certain form, therefore they have all of this prejudice inside of them. It is not easy that you kill a thing inside of you which you have lived with

your whole life. We understand this, only it has to be the start of reflection. If you never begin to reflect about what you are doing, you are never going to change. Never.

The number of the women who dedicate themselves are increasing, and they attempt to learn what Capoeira really is all about. They take it for themselves as an objective of life.

Nowadays we already have contramestre. There is Janja, there is Paulinha (two contramestras formed by mestre Moraes in Salvador and leading now a nucleus in São Paulo). This is an advance. In this event (the roda of women on the 8th of March) we received lots of support from the men as well, including compliments. They even asked us when the next roda would take place. That is to say, a major exchange is beginning and this space is one we have conquered. The roda is still not a space where women have an active voice, they do not have effective participation. This is slowly changing and can only be made more effective if we can manage to maintain open the dialogue and have an answer from our companheiros who are practicing Capoeira with us and dividing the same space.

You already talked about the support that you missed from your companheiro, how was the support from your mestre? Was it taken into consideration the difficulties which arised for your training due to your situation as a single mother?

In the same way in which I responded to the racial question -a black talks about this question with much more sensitivity because one has lived it- I talk about the sexist question. Manôel always gave me support so that I could train in Capoeira, and in reality his support was always to charge me, to charge my presence. All these difficulties were presented to him and he was tolerant in certain aspects, for example to liberate the question of time. He did demand a lot though in the sense that I could not carry out certain movements, but he never questioned the reasons why. I am a woman who lives in a context where all these things have never been permitted. It is a lack of comprehension. It has to be the major perception of what is the feminine world, and what it means to be a woman in society. Only by climbing up whichever favela in Rio you will see what the life of a woman in Brazilian society is all about. He never had to carry this weight of responsibility which is normal for a woman who is forced to raise a child alone. These are the differences which have to be discussed and explained more often so that there is comprehension from both sides.

Now, all this discussion has to be intergrated into your dedication to Capoeira. It will not progress if you just stay in a theoretical discussion regarding the growth of women in Capoeira if you do not search out this growth on an individual basis. This will only result from practice. Training. Do I have a difficulty to take the berimbau? Well, enter into the struggle. Take it. Train in your home. Listen. Question and start to really play berimbau. The discussion within Capoeira cannot only be theoretical, because it is continous movement. You have more power to question the role of women inside of Capoeira when you reach to penetrate deeply inside of it. In the moment you begin to perfect yourself and become more and more a Capoeirista. The demand exists on all sides.

On the 8th of March the first roda of women took place here in Rio de Janeiro. You already mentioned that this roda was very well recieved from both men and women. Who initiated this roda here in Rio and what happened on a practical level? Does a structure exist between the women who organize these type of events?

The idea emerged informally. We started to converse with women who have practiced Capoeira over a long period of time and in order to organize everything properly we had meetings here in the house. To converse, to play berimbau, and to practice the very

movements of Capoeira. We want to give it continuity, but it is not a nucleus which exists formally. One objective of organizing this roda is to provide that the women have a mirror of what exists in terms of possibilities within Capoeira, which they themselves can realize. And so that they can find references for those possibilities.

Seeing various women leading a roda...

The roda was very beautiful, with a lot of preoccupation for the space, we put flowers, a table of fruits, and those little details which show a bit of what the feminine world is. Capoeira is basically expression. We have different movements as those of the men, basic differences which imprint a different expression and although Capoeira is basically expression.. The feminine world has a different expression than the masculine, it is neither better nor worse. The preoccupation of the finest details, such as the organization of the space, this lavagem⁶ which happened in the beginning, of the women arriving and searching for the spiritual cleaning is something very proper to women; related to protection.

Are women also aggressive?

Women have another form of expressing aggression. Yes they have aggression, but we have a different manner of expressing what belongs to the feminine world. What have we learned up until today about defending countries? You have a strong military, a war, well, you have to make war in order to defend yourself. And in reality we learned this as well socially, and I do not really know if this belongs to the feminine world. We have feminine warriors in our history, standing at the front of the battle, and they fought for their people, but I do not know if this is an essential part of the feminine world, this for to express self-defense and one's own aggressivity. I do not know if it was already allowed that we utilize these expressions like something essentially and specifically ours, therefore I cannot say if this is or is not essentially from the feminine world.

How do you want to search out the possibilities to more deeply express the essence of the feminine world?

I do not want to copy a masculine model. It has a little bit to do with what I mentioned about the expression in the roda. Returning to what I had said before that we do not have to make offensive movements. If one day I have to physically confront a man, I will not confront him arm to arm, because I know that my physical and biological structure is different than that of a man. Will I defend myself? If possible, would I hit back? I would. But I would search out a manner to not confront him with strength, measuring our strength, in a struggle of strength with him. Physically I know that a man is stronger than I am. As Capoeira is not about strength, strength then loses its importance. I would search for an expression which belongs to me. I do not want to have to become masculine to train in Capoeira. I do not want to be recognized as I have often heard it from men, "She plays very nice, as if a man were playing". I do not want to appear like a man as he plays, I want to be a Capoeirista woman. I am not involved in competition with the masculine world, I want to continue in the feminine world. The feminine as well as the masculine expressions are important in life, to balance out nature. I like my femininity. I like to discover more and more my womanhood. Lots of things from the feminine universe have been lost, they have been massacred, they have been questioned in their validity.

⁶ lavagem, literally means laundry. It means spiritual or religious processions.

I have heard often in Brasil that Capoeira should be a cultural, national movement. How can people from outside be intergrated in this context, in the world of Capoeira?

To really know what Capoeira is about, you have to participate in a certain form within the culture from where it was born and concieved. This is for those who wish to become more profoundly involved. I never met Capoeira outside of this country, but I know that various difficulties exist that it happens. Now there is one thing. Capoeira is a universal thing, the movement goes in this direction. If it would not make sense to universalize Capoeira Angola, then it would not make sense to found a international fundation of Capoeira Angola. Capoeira is an open universe for whichever person who likes to participate, concerning the culture which is inherent, its own structure. Everyone has the possibility to learn Capoeira, and it is like my mestre always says, "It is not something which comes into someone, it comes out." Capoeira is like nature, like life, we are all participants of nature, the cosmos, and we have the adventures of our daily life. That means that it is inside of us all. It is experienced in daily life, the movement of nature which follows the laws of its own creation. Through the movements which flow from outside to inside, the possibility exists that everyone can learn Capoeira, if they are open to listening, learning the necessary elements for the expression to be manifest. Here and in Japan the possibility exists that this happens. The worry which many mestres have, and I think that is correct, Capoeira Angola from nearly being distinguished not expanding and becomeing something truely big so that the control of the quality will be lost. The intention of the whole world is that Capoeira grows. Nobody wants that Capoeira spends its whole life in the ghetto. We are taking the risk to die in the ghetto because we are not participating in the positive aspects of modernity, of what advantages exist for ones own survival within society. In the ghetto we protect ourselves against many bad things which modernity bring. The worry which the mestres have, that it does not become so big and one does no longer know what Capoeira is, and what it is not. We have to have a minimum of direction. There in Japan, I do not know what is happening with Capoeira Angola. The preoccupation has to exist; first by knowing if I can use that one as a reference of Capoeira Angola. If we do not do that we will form a movement which is similar to that of Capoeira Regional. To expand, to measure, we lose referential, we lose identity. This is very risky. The process has to be slow, and sometimes pass through something more radical.

How do you see Capoeira Angola as being a way of life?

Capoeira became a part of my life to handle everyday life. It was important for changes in my life and for my physical, emotional and spirituall well-being. I still have little experience in Capoeira, it is only six years, and this thing, to bring Capoeira to life is something you learn with the years living and reflecting about what you are doing in life. I trie to see the difficulties that I have and in which way Capoeira can help solving them. I still lack a lot of experience, to accomplish the dialectic between Capoeira and life.

But you have to be careful, too.

I see the mandinga⁷ for example as essential to survive in the society I'm living in: This society is extremly unequal, competing and hierarchical, the daily struggle to survive is very difficult. So the mandinga is essential, but I don't want it to play a role in all the relationships in my life. The more intimate my relationship to a person is, the less mandinga I want to use. I want my personal relations in a certain way to be free from this burden so that I can relate in a

⁷ The charme that makes the ease of Mandingeiros posslble. Next to malicia, it is a further fundamental Element of Capoeira Angola. Mandinga is on the one hand a spiritual strength that every person has, on the other hand it is the movement of the body that is carried out in the game of Capoeira Angola.

purser sense: closer, more real and humane. When I need mandinga, I want to always use it, grow with it. That`s why I`m here in school, to learn exactly this.

Ladainha, composed by Cristina

I was at the edge of the ocean
I was there to contemplate the sea
I was flirting with the waves
And I prayed to Iemanjá
Strong wind, seaquake Iemanjá
Gives fear to sail
When I dissolve in these waves
I may even grow
So I answer
With a slight shiver
Strong wind, seaquake
You will have to calm down
Whirling, floating, drifting
Over the sea
The moon only loves the sun
To be able to shine
Your sword is of war
For love
For Capoeira
In your womb I seek refuge
As destiny of this love.