

Review

Acuña, Mauricio. 2015. *A Ginga da Nação: Intelectuais na Capoeira e Capoeiristas Intelectuais (1930-1969)*. São Paulo: Editora Alameda. 280 p.

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In this thorough and thoughtful book, Mauricio Acuña addresses how Bahian capoeira, which is simultaneously a martial art, dance, and folklorized manifestation, became the exemplar of the form and a metonym of Brazilian national identity. Acuña's framework draws from cultural historian Carl Schorske (1990) and sociologist Norbert Elias (1995) in order to contextually situate capoeira as part of a generational artistic and cultural movement that emerged and evolved from the 1930s to the 1960s. In particular, Acuña demonstrates how the 1930 Revolution impacted a generation of Bahians, especially elites who sought to defend their local power and identity against Getúlio Vargas' centralizing and frequently repressive Estado Novo dictatorship. In Salvador, a cohort of intellectuals, in particular the anthropologist, Edison Carneiro, and the famous novelist, Jorge Amado, responded to these changes by attempting to "discover the folk [*descobrer o povo*]." This discovery focused in large part on capoeira which, in turn, became a focal point for a broad community of practice that included capoeira practitioners (*capoeiristas*), domestic and international intellectuals, such as Arthur Ramos and the American anthropologist, Ruth Landes, and artists such as the Argentinian painter, Carybé. By illustrating the social and institutional networks in which capoeira and capoeiristas circulated, Acuña parallels Hermano Vianna's (1995) discussion of samba as a national emblem that was co-constructed by musicians, intellectuals, and institutions. However, the great strength in *A Ginga da Nação* lies in how it uncovers the multiple, deliberate, and often contradictory strategies which previously marginalized capoeira practitioners employed in order to legitimize and professionalize their activities. Specifically, Chapter Two is especially compelling as it compares how specific *mestres* sought to distance capoeira from its reputation as a violent,

subversive practice and into a more musical, formalized, and folklorized form that could benefit them both financially and socially. This chapter focuses on individuals such as Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Bimba whose stylistic and philosophical approach to capoeira significantly diverged. For example, while Mestre Pastinha presented himself as the guardian and creator of the ostensibly more traditional “*Capoeira Angola*” style, Mestre Bimba incorporated strikes [*golpes*] from other martial arts into his “*Capoeira Regional*.” Nevertheless, both *mestres* were concerned with valorizing capoeira and erasing its prior criminalization and persecution. By detailing several *mestres*’ relationships with intellectuals, writers, the press, and public institutions, Acuña also demonstrates how the nationalization of Bahian capoeira was not an exclusively elite project, but the product of multiple, interested actors. These insights neatly dovetail with Acuña’s adaptation of Manuela Carneiro da Cunha’s (2009) dual formulation of culture as a theoretical concept versus “culture” as a pragmatic resource. Both of these versions of culture converge in the capoeira context since academics *and* capoeiristas transformed capoeira into a folkloric form that came to stand for the African third in Brazil’s triracial, nationalist narrative. However, Acuña also shows how capoeira’s hybrid status as sport/art, Bahian/Brazilian, and folk/elite made it especially appropriate for reinforcing Brazilian *mestiçagem* as a national value. In fact, the contrasts between how various practitioners and enthusiasts characterized and utilized capoeira also demonstrate how specific actors, especially capoeiristas, alternately emphasized specific aspects of capoeira for various purposes. While Acuña’s examination of capoeiristas’ and intellectuals’ practices around capoeira is well-developed, perhaps his contributions could be enhanced by more directly theorizing how race and class (as an ensemble) impacted how these actors developed capoeira into an institutionally legitimized practice. For example, the aforementioned *mestres* were clearly trying to combat their racial and class markedness by transforming capoeira, which suggests that they were well aware of the limits of *mestiçagem*’s valorization even as they were contributing to its creation. This and similar insights could have been foregrounded much more in order to show how analyzing capoeira’s history can help us better understand race and class in Brazil. In part, the organization of the chapters obscures the important ways in which racial and class ideologies impacted the nationalization of Bahian capoeira. Specifically, more of the information from Chapter One on

academic discourses of race and national identity in Brazil could be better integrated with the more “on -the-ground” perspectives Acuña presents in the aforementioned second chapter and Chapter Three, which focuses more on the artists and intellectuals who studied and depicted Bahian capoeira. Meanwhile, Chapter Four, which details how capoeiristas further incorporated music to “civilize” and popularize Bahian capoeira, fits neatly within the overall narrative because it provides a glimpse into how capoeira became part of Brazilian popular culture during and a bit beyond the Vargas era. While the book is a welcome contribution to studies of capoeira, it will also prove productive for Brazilianists interested in learning more about Bahia during the Modernist and Estado Novo periods. This intellectual and cultural history is also appropriate for anthropologists and humanities scholars interested in Brazilian music and other popular culture because it provides some of the historical context for understanding contemporary trends. However, given that this book is addressed to a Brazilian audience, those who are unfamiliar with capoeira and the Vargas Era might have to do some additional background reading.