

The Roda de Capoeira

Roda means “Wheel” in Portuguese (pronounced *hoda*).

In Capoeira the Roda is the space where the game of Capoeira takes place. It is formed by the people taking part in the action of Capoeira. The word Roda is also used to describe the whole event that takes place in this space, incorporating the many different aspects of Capoeira.

The Roda is made up of musicians, chorus and players. Each *capoeirista* taking part in a Roda will at times be each of these. It is a vital part of the practice of Capoeira that capoeiristas in a Roda participate fully in all three of these areas.

I will start by describing the musicians, chorus and players in turn and the conventions of a contemporary Roda which allow them to interact with each other; I will then look at some of the variations that can be found in different Rodas. With these basics in place I will investigate the history and origins of the Capoeira Roda and discuss some of its more esoteric aspects and symbolism.

The musicians

The musicians form the *bateria* of the Roda. *Bateria* literally means ‘battery’ or ‘drum kit’ and is a group of percussionists both in the context of Capoeira and also in other forms; in Samba for instance.

The *bateria* is at the heart of the Roda. It is usually led by the Master, or most senior capoeirista present, who plays the lead *berimbau* (a single stringed percussion instrument of African origin). At the London School of Capoeira, and commonly in many other schools, the full *bateria* consists of three berimbaus - the *gunga*, *médio* and *viola* or *violinha*, two *pandeiros* (tambourine), one *reco reco* (rasp), one *agogo* (cowbell) and one *atabaque* (standing drum). The members of the *bateria* sit or stand in a line at the ‘head’ of the Roda with the lead berimbau player in the centre, flanked by the other two berimbaus and two *pandeiros*; with the *agogo* to the far right of the lead berimbau and the *reco reco* and *atabaque* to the far left.

Layout of the *bateria*

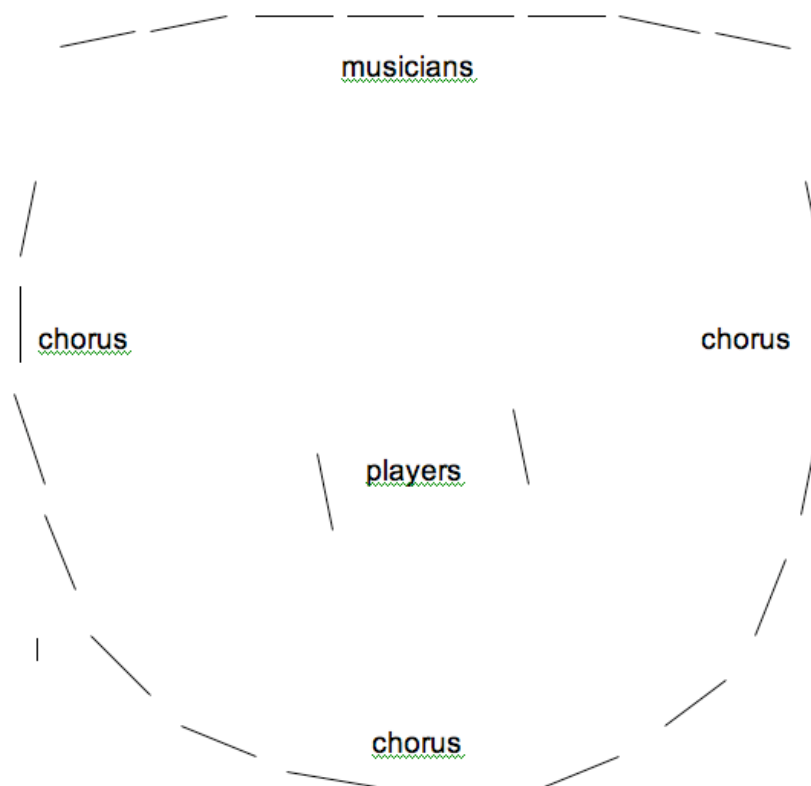
agogo	pandeiro	berimbau viola	berimbau gunga	berimbau médio	pandeiro	reco reco	atabaque
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front

The chorus

The chorus consists of all the remaining capoeiristas who are not at any one time playing an instrument or engaged in playing a game of Capoeira in the centre of the Roda. The chorus sit or stand in a horseshoe in front of and facing the bateria. A space is left at either end of the chorus, between it and the musicians, to allow the players to enter and exit the centre of the Roda.

Commonly the game of Capoeira is played by two players at a time within the space defined by the musicians and chorus. The players are members of the chorus who enter the centre of the Roda to play Capoeira.



Plan of a Roda de Capoeira

Conventions of the Roda

At the start of a Capoeira Roda the musicians and chorus take their places as shown above. Nothing dictates whether a Capoeirista should start the Roda as a musician or chorus member. The leader of the Roda, who in this case we will call the Master, will play an open note on the gunga (the lowest sounding of the three berimbaus), which 'calls' the capoeiristas and indicates that the Roda is about to start. Once everyone is in place the Master starts to play the rhythm Angola. This is considered the oldest and most traditional of the rhythms, or *toques*, used in Capoeira. Next the other two

berimbaus start to play, each playing a different rhythm. First the médio, playing the toque *São Bento pequeno*, then the violinha playing *São Bento grande*. Now the other instruments will start to play one by one: the two pandeiros, then the reco reco and the agogo.

Once the rhythm is established the Master will open the roda with the common Capoeira expletive '*lê*', and will then start to sing a *ladainha* (litany). This is a narrative solo that can serve many purposes. It may be an established song, or improvised by the singer. It can tell of the history of Capoeira; or tell of a well known capoeirista or incident; it can be used by the Master to give news; or it can be an improvisation on anything the Master wants to communicate to the group.

When the *ladainha* starts the two most experienced capoeiristas sitting in the chorus will get up and enter the Roda, one from either end of the assembled musicians, and squat in front of the Master. This place on the floor or ground directly in front of the Master is called the *pé do berimbau* (the foot of the berimbau) or the *pé da cruz* (the foot of the cross). The *pé do berimbau* has great significance in the Roda, and is where all the individual games of Capoeira start and finish.

The *ladainha* is followed by the 'salutations'. This is where the call and response, which is the form that most Capoeira songs take, starts in the Roda. It is at this moment, just before the chorus sings it's first response, that the atabaque starts to play.

The salutations commonly start with the following lines:

Master: *lê, Viva meu Deus* (le, long live my God)

Chorus: *lê, Viva meu Deus, camará* (le, long live my God, comrade)

Master: *lê, Viva meu meu Mestre* (le, long live my Master)

Chorus: *lê, Viva meu Mestre, camará* (le, long live my Master, comrade)

Master: *lê, quem me ensinou* (le, who taught me)

Chorus: *lê, quem me ensinou, camará* (le, who taught me, comrade)

Master: *lê, a Capoeira* (le, Capoeira)

Chorus: *lê, a Capoeira, camará* (le, Capoeira, camara)

These can be followed by a wide variety of other salutations.

It is at this point that the Roda is ready and prepared for the game of Capoeira. The different elements required to create the environment for the game are in place: the physical space – created by all the participants, the rhythms played by the musicians and the songs sung by everyone.

The master will now start to sing a *chula* or *corrido*. These are the call and response songs that will continue for the rest of the Roda. They tend to be made up of short verses or single lines. When the *chula* starts the master will indicate with the berimbau that the players may start to play. This is done by playing a regular 'open' note on the berimbau and sometimes also by tipping the beirimbau forward between the two squatting capoeiristas. The players then shake hands, raise their hands to thank the musicians, touch the *pé do berimbau* with their hands or heads and, facing each other make a small cartwheel, or *au*, into the centre of the Roda. From the moment the

players have shaken hands their game of Capoeira has begun. The players are now free to play their game as they wish, using the many movements of Capoeira in time with the music and singing. To quote Masters Sylvia Bazzarelli and Marcos dos Santos of The London School of Capoeira “The Roda is only complete when the instruments, the singing, the chorus and the games take place”.

During the game two capoeiristas from the chorus will squat just outside the opening at either side of the Roda ready to play. After the initial game, which is usually played by the most experienced capoeiristas sitting in the chorus, the subsequent games are open to anyone, regardless of experience or seniority.

The master will indicate that the game should finish by once again playing a regular open string on the berimbau. The players, hearing this, will shake hands and return to the pé do berimbau, where they touch the floor once again before leaving the Roda, one to either side of the musicians, and returning to sit with the chorus.

The two players who had been waiting to play now enter the Roda, squat at the pé do berimbau and await the signal from the Master to start their game. The Roda will continue like this for as long as the master sees fit. Between games, members of the chorus may offer to take an instrument thereby swapping out one of the musicians and giving them a chance to play. From time to time during the Roda one will see a symbolic break in the game called a *chamada*, which literally means ‘call’. One of the players will call the other and the two players will commonly take small steps backwards and forwards in a close stance, which appear like a dance. Different chamadas are used for a variety of reasons: to take a break in the game or as a way of testing the knowledge of the ones opponent.

Typically, as the Roda progresses, the tempo of the music increases, and with this, usually towards the end of the Roda, the master will indicate to a waiting capoeirista that it’s time to start *comprar de jogo*, or ‘buying the game’. In this phase of the Roda, when indicated by the berimbau, just one waiting capoeirista will enter the Roda while the previous game is still being played. They do this by ‘cutting’ the game - reaching one arm between the two players. While doing this they face the player they wish to play, giving their back to the capoeirista they want to cut out. The game then continues with the capoeirista who has been cut out making a swift exit from the Roda. During *comprar de jogo* the transition from game to game is much faster and may not involve the capoeiristas shaking hands or starting and finishing at the pé do berimbau. In a sense it becomes one continuous game with changing players.

To accompany *comprar de jogo* the chorus are usually encouraged to clap in time with the music. The songs tend to get more rhythmic during this phase, with very short lines of call and response. As the master starts to sing songs about leaving – as in ‘*Adeus, Boa Viagem*’ (good bye, good trip) – the capoeiristas know that the Roda is drawing to a close.

Finally the master will stop singing and indicate with the berimbau that the game is to end. The players will stop their game and squat at the pé do berimbau. The master may then lower the volume of the musicians and lead them to the final note. When the last note has been played the Roda is over. The last two players shake hands acknowledge

the pé do berimbau and leave the Roda. The end of the Roda is usually celebrated with cheering and clapping.



A modern street Roda



A Roda with Waldemar Rodrigues da Paixão

Group dynamics in the Roda

As we can see the Roda relies on a complex relationship of different elements that are constantly in flux. The leader of the Roda provides much of the impetus for its smooth running, but a successful Roda also relies on each capoeirista playing their part, both physically and mentally, and committing their energies to whatever role they are taking. When there are enough participants with positive intentions then the framework of the Roda provides the environment for a positive feedback loop: the musicians inspire the chorus to sing; the chorus and musicians together inspire the players to play; the players in turn inspire both the chorus and musicians; and everyone is inspired to enter the Roda and play more.

The Roda provides a remarkable environment that can, through the participants' collective unity of intention, inspire each capoeirista to play beyond their perceived limits. This vital group dynamic is an interesting counterbalance to the individualism of each capoeirista that is so greatly encouraged in this art form.

The diversity of Rodas

Although the Roda as described above contains the key features that can probably be observed in most Rodas it is important to understand that Capoeira is not bound by defined rules, such as a sport. In fact, a hallmark of Capoeira is its lack of rules and constraints. Being an art form that has evolved over hundreds of years and has been disseminated orally and through practice from Master to student it is perhaps better to think of Capoeira as a language: It changes and develops through use, with local variations found in every school, and idiosyncrasies found from capoeirista to capoeirista.

Let us look at specific variations to be found in different aspects of the Roda.

Purpose

Rodas can be held for different reasons and these can affect how they are carried out. Most often a Roda is held simply to allow capoeiristas to practice their art, but it may also be for a demonstration of the art form, for a grading ceremony, competition or even as a way of busking to earn money on the street.

A Roda that has external spectators will usually feel very different to the participants. Often where Rodas are held as a demonstration the horseshoe shape created by the chorus will be opened out to allow spectators to see the action more clearly. The style of game played is also quite different. Games tend to be more 'open' and movements can be accentuated for show and clarity for the outside audience. It can become much less about the dialogue between two players and more about looking impressive. When Roda's are held on the street to earn money they often include as many flourishes to astonish the spectators as possible. For example, a coin or hat will be placed in the centre of the Roda which the players will endeavor to pick up with their teeth during the game.

I have never come across a Roda which moves as a whole, but I would be surprised if a Roda de Capoeira has not at one time or other found it's way into a carnival procession or onto a carnival float.

At the Roda of a grading ceremony, or *batizado*, there will usually be several visiting Masters and other experienced capoeiristas who have been invited by the leader of the group. This naturally adds an intensity and sense of occasion to the Roda through the collective knowledge, experience and strong personalities of the invited capoeiristas.

Size

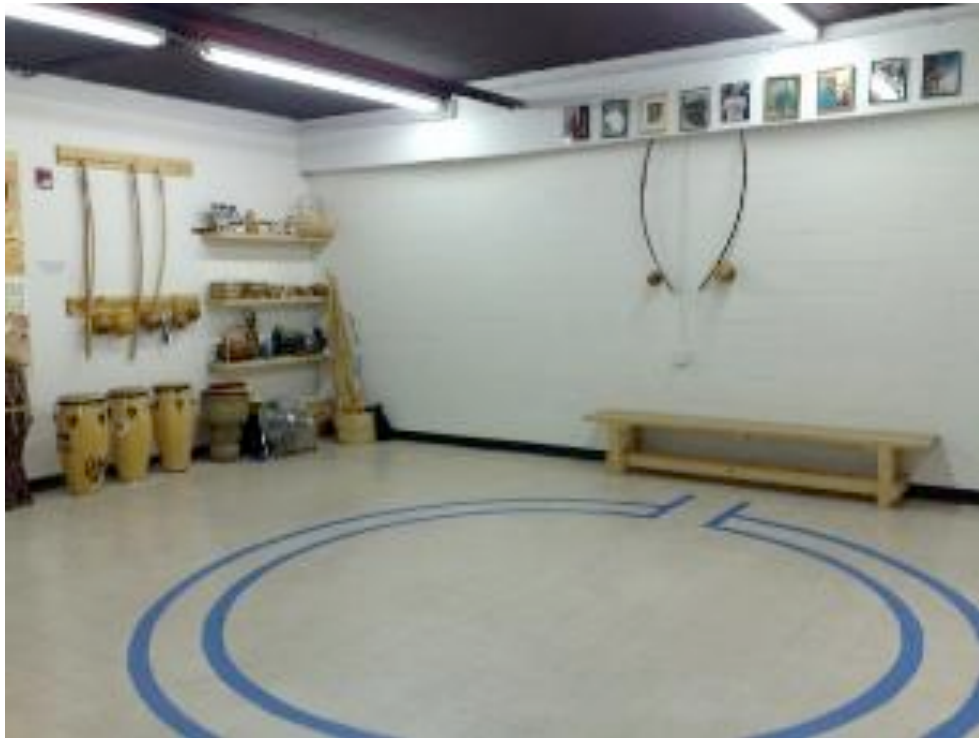
The size of a Roda, in terms of participants, is decided simply by the number of capoeiristas present. There is no limit to the amount of people that can take part. The physical size of the playing space does, however, have a great effect on the players as the space created by the physical boundary encloses the game. Keeping a Roda compact can help to focus the games within it and encourages the players to develop their skills by limiting the space available to them. In many Rodas there is a tendency amongst the chorus to relax as it progresses and this often leads to it becoming larger and less well ordered. The leader of the Roda, being aware of this, will from time to time encourage the chorus to improve the Roda's shape and reduce its size. If the amount of participants makes the Roda larger than desired the chorus can sometimes form two or more rows to reduce the size of the playing space.



An example of a large Roda

The lower limits of what can be said to be a Roda is more difficult to define and is, no doubt, a matter of opinion. It is certainly the case that if you have very few people in a Roda then the playing space becomes less defined as the number of participants

reduces. There are Rodas where the space is marked on the floor or ground creating an artificial boundary.



The boundaries of the Roda marked on the floor in a Capoeira school.

Some capoeiristas would say that the boundary need not even be physical and can be imagined. If one is going to uphold the notion that a Roda requires live music, singing and players then I would say that a minimum of four participants is required: one person playing an instrument and leading the singing, one to answer the chorus and two players. There are some that might even say that two capoeiristas playing to recorded music could be considered a Roda, and that what is important is the players' intentions rather than the physical presence of the musicians and chorus.

Music

There is great variety to be found in the music of different Rodas and the use and combination of instruments. The bateria as described earlier is common but by no means definitive. Which instruments are used, and how many, is often down to practicality – the number of capoeiristas participating in the Roda - as much as being guided by the preferences of the Master, school or person leading the Roda. Any combination of the instruments can be used, as can a single instrument. It is vital, however, that there is singing. Most capoeiristas would agree that without the songs there is no Capoeira.

In keeping with the maverick nature of Capoeira and many capoeiristas there is no restriction on using percussion instruments other than those mentioned above, although it is unusual. For instance the *xequerê*, which is used in ceremonies of the Afro-Brazilian religion *Candomblé* may at times find it's way into the bateria of a Roda. In the times of prohibition, capoeiristas were often allowed to practice undetected in houses of *Candomblé*. It is in this kind of setting that the mixing of traditions easily occurs.

The range of songs in Capoeira is great and undefined. Each capoeirista will learn songs from their master and other capoeiristas; and more recently also from recordings. Exactly which songs are sung during any given Roda is down to the whim and preferences of the lead singer. As with all people, capoeiristas have their favourite songs that they will sing again and again, as they will neglect those they are less fond of.

Behaviour

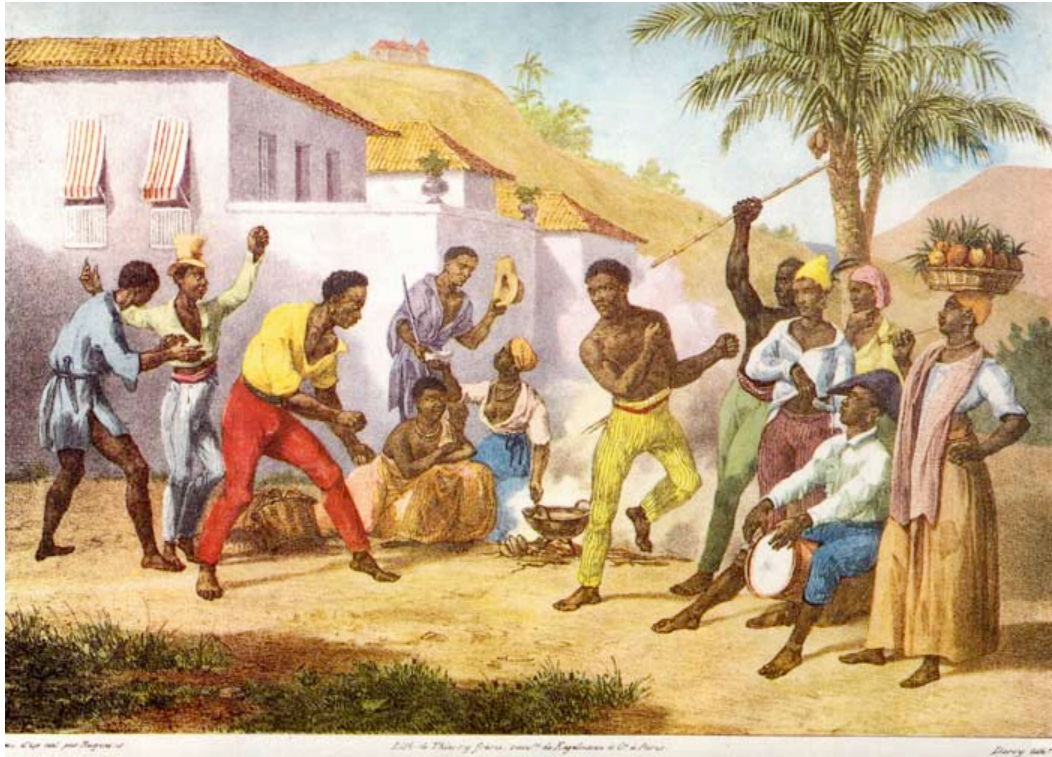
Every Roda is made up of individuals, and as such assumes its character from the personalities and motivations of its participants. This accounts for much of the variety from one Roda to the next. Each Capoeira school or group will also have its own way of doing things which is guided by the Master or leader of the group. These differences can account for variations in the way people enter the Roda for instance; or how they play the instruments; or the rhythm clapped by the chorus; or whether the members of the bateria and chorus sit or stand during the Roda. These differences also extend more fundamentally to the moves and style of the game as well as the intentions of the players.

As a player becomes more experienced with years of training and practice their personality as a capoeirista grows and becomes more defined. This can be very visible in the way they behave in the Roda. For instance a capoeirista with strong beliefs of one kind or another may incorporate symbolic gestures into their game. This can particularly be seen they enter and leave the Roda and at the pé da cruz.

History of the Roda de Capoeira

Few things in the history of Capoeira are certain. It is an art form that has evolved over many generations, with knowledge passing from one practitioner to another but with virtually no surviving written record of its early development. It has its origins in the struggle for survival of a diverse range of African peoples, enslaved by the Portuguese and taken to Brazil from the 16th century onwards.

There are barely any records predating the 19th century of anything that is recognisably Capoeira as distinct from other rituals, fights or dances. Even in the 1820's from when we have some surviving records such as Rugendas's well known picture entitled "*The game of capuera or dance of war*", or Augustus Earl's picture of 1822, "*Negros fighting*", the pictures contain elements that we recognise from the modern game of Capoeira, but these are still a long way from the formalised concept of a Roda which we have today.



"The game of capuera or dance of war" by Johann Moritz Rugendas in *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique dans le Bresil* (Englmen et Cie., Paris, 1824)



"Negros lutando, Brazil" (Negroes fighting, Brazil) by Augustus Earle, 1822

So where did the form of the Roda de Capoeira come from, with it's band of percussion instruments led by the Master and berimbau, and the circular shape of capoeiristas singing the chorus?

The shape of the Roda is simply the most natural way for a group of people to gather around a focal point. Since man first gathered around a fire we have instinctively known that a circle of people facing inwards is the most natural and egalitarian way for a group to communicate and focus on a shared experience. In relation to Capoeira there are many other African traditions, be they dance or religious ceremonies, which involve groups sitting, standing or dancing in one all inclusive circle. One such example is *Batuque*, an Afro Brazilian dance with links to Samba and Capoeira. This can be seen clearly in another painting by Rugenda.



“The Batuque” by Johann Moritz Rugendas 1822-1825

From 1808 cultural practices of African origin became more and more restricted in Brazil, inevitably leading to them being driven underground. In 1892, just four years after the abolition of slavery, and the formation of the Brazilian Republic in 1888, Capoeira was outlawed. At that time, particularly in the cities, capoeiristas were commonly linked with criminality, gangs and street fighting.

During the years of prohibition, which lasted up until the 1930's, many capoeiristas retreated from the cities to the seclusion of the vast state of Bahia. It is here that I believe the Roda as we know it today started to take shape - as capoeiristas consolidated their knowledge of the martial art form and tried to hold onto their African roots and traditions. It is only in this period that the berimbau, which no doubt had been

in use in Brazil for hundreds of years, became associated with Capoeira. This instrument is, in the words of Mestre Bimba, the “soul of Capoeira”. I think it likely that the almost spiritual reverence accorded the berimbau in Capoeira arose in this period as groups of capoeiristas practiced in houses of Candomblé to avoid the authorities. This also goes for the significance of the *pé do berimbau* (the foot of the berimbau), and it’s more obviously devotional alternative name, the *pé da cruz* (foot of the cross).

It was Mestre Bimba, born in Salvador, Bahia in 1900, along with Mestre Pastinha born just a few year earlier in 1889, who brought Capoeira out of it’s years in hiding with the establishment of their academies in the 1930’s. It was these two incredibly influential Masters and their academies that can in many ways be regarded as the founding fathers of the modern game of Capoeira that continues to develop to this day.

So, we can see from the long, nebulous and convoluted history of Capoeira that some seemingly very simple questions like - when was the first Roda? - are impossible to answer in exact terms. I would probably say that there was no ‘first’ Roda de Capoeira, simply a continuum of traditions and practices that have led to what we call and understand the Roda to be today. But, as I have outlined above, the amalgamation of the elements in a modern Roda happened from the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries. It follows, therefore, that Capoeira exists outside of the Roda, as indeed Capoeira existed before the Roda de Capoeira as we know it developed.



An early 20th century street Roda

Symbolism of the Roda

The Roda de Capoeira is woven from many different strands: cultural and musical traditions, fighting forms, religious beliefs and individual histories - all evolving with time and rooted in the struggle to survive oppression. It is no wonder then that Capoeira and the Roda are a rich source of symbolism. Many see the game of Capoeira as a microcosm of life, and as such the Roda is the world where this game of life is played out. For some it can evoke the deities of their beliefs and for others it can represent the hard realities of life. With experience of life's ups and downs one can grow respectful and reverent towards the world, and so the capoeirista may grow to feel about the Roda - a place where time and again they go to make their fortune and meet their fate.

The songs of Capoeira enrich and encourage this symbolism with metaphors, synonyms and allusion – creating a world in which the mind can wander.

Ultimately the Roda de Capoeira is as simple as it is complicated: you enter, you play, you leave, finishing where you started, and starting where you finish.

Which brings us back to where we started. Roda means wheel.

Simon Fliegner
Cordao verde e azul
February 2010

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