

The word *capoeira* probably comes from the [Tupi language](#) , referring to the areas of low vegetation in the Brazilian interior.

Origins

Capoeira is believed to be connected with tribal fighting, called Engolo, from the [Benguela Highlands](#) region of [Angola](#)

. In many tribes in Africa, a tradition exists where people fight each other in order to acquire a bride or desired women. They fight body to body, without weapons, and are held inside a circle.

In the [16th century](#) , [Portugal](#) had claimed one of the largest territories of the [colonial empires](#) , but lacked people to colonize it, especially workers. In the

[Brazilian](#) colony, the Portuguese, like many European colonists, chose to use [slavery](#) to supply this shortage of workers.

[Spanish](#) and

[English](#) colonists enslaved other europeans such as the Irish and French.

In its first century, the main economic activity in the colony was the production and processing of [sugarcane](#) . Portuguese colonists used to create large sugarcane farms called *engenhos*, which were dependent on the labor of enslaved workers. Slaves, living in inhumane and humiliating conditions, were forced to work hard and often suffered physical punishment for any small misbehavior.

[\[1\]](#)

Even though slaves outnumbered the Portuguese colonists, the lack of weapons, the colonial law, the disagreement between slaves coming from different African cultures and the lack of knowledge about the new land and its surroundings usually discouraged the idea of a rebellion.

In this environment, *capoeira* was born not as a fighting style, but as a hope of survival. It was a hope of survival because they would say they were dancing when a colonist came along but really they were practicing fighting and preparing to fight back. A tool with which an escaped slave, completely unequipped, could survive in the hostile, unknown land and face the hunt of the *capitães-do-mato*, the armed and mounted colonial agents who were charged with finding and capturing escapees. So although they were outnumbering them without weapons they were hopeless but once they had learned how to fight they could break free.

Soon several groups of slaves would gather and establish [quilombos](#), settlements in far and hard to reach places. Some

quilombos

would soon increase in size, attracting more fugitive slaves, Brazilian natives and even Europeans escaping the law or

[Christian](#)

extremism. Some

quilombos

would grow to an enormous size, becoming a real independent multi-ethnic state.

[2]

Everyday life in a *quilombo* offered freedom and the opportunity to revive traditional cultures away from colonial oppression.

[2] In this kind of multi-ethnic community, constantly threatened by Portuguese colonial troops,

Capoeira

evolved from a survival tool to a martial art focused on war.

The biggest of the *quilombos*, the [Quilombo dos Palmares](#), consisted of many villages which lasted for more than a century, resisting many colonial attacks. This

quilombo

resisted at least 24 small attacks and 18 larger colonial invasions. Portuguese soldiers sometimes said that it took more than one

[dragoon](#)

to capture a

quilombo

warrior, since they would defend themselves with a *strangely moving fighting technique*. The governor from that province declared "it is harder to defeat a *quilombo* than the [Dutch](#) invaders."
[\[2\]](#)

Urbanization

In 1808, the prince and future king [Dom João VI](#), along with the Portuguese court, escaped to Brazil to flee the [invasion](#) of Portugal by Napoleon's troops. Formerly exploited only for its natural resources and commodity crops, the colony finally began to develop as a nation.
[\[3\]](#)

The Portuguese monopoly effectively came to an end when Brazilian ports opened for trade with friendly foreign nations.
[\[4\]](#)

Cities grew in importance as a result. Brazilians finally had permission to manufacture common products once required to be imported from Portugal, such as glass.
[\[3\]](#)

Registries of capoeira practices existed since the 18th century in [Rio de Janeiro](#), [Salvador](#) and [Recife](#)

. As a result of the growing urban development, more slaves were brought to cities and the increase in

[social life](#)

in Brazilian cities gave

Capoeira

prominence and allowed it to be taught and practiced among more peoples. In Rio the colonial government tried to suppress it, as they considered the martial art subversive to their control. They established severe physical punishments to its practice.
[\[5\]](#)

Ample data from police records, dating back to the 1800s, is available, demonstrating that many slaves and free coloured individuals were detained for practicing capoeira:

"From 288 slaves that entered the Calabouço jail during the years 1857 and 1858, 80 (31%) were arrested for capoeira, and only 28 (10.7%) for running away. Out of 4,303 arrests in Rio

police jail in 1862, 404 detainees—nearly 10%—had been arrested for capoeira."

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