

# **Afrikan=Black Combat Forms Hidden in Plain Sight: Engolo/Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking and Asafo Flag Dancing<sup>1</sup>**

by

Obádélé Kambon, Ph.D.  
obkambon@staff.ug.edu.gh  
University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies  
Accra, Ghana

## **Abstract**

This paper presents a Pan-Afrikan tri-continental analysis of Afrikan/Black combat sciences, and in this, it challenges the erroneous notion that the dance-like movements of Afrikan combat sciences originated in attempts to trick enslavers. Therefore, this work demonstrates that Afrikan combat sciences, regardless of location, grow out of a shared worldview informed by practical considerations that are effective and time-tested. Further, the contemporary expressions of Engolo/Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking, and Asafo Flag Dancing are examined by means of a comparison between natural vs. unnatural responses to oppression.

**Keywords:** Engolo, Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking, Asafo, Dance, Combat





## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will discuss Afrikan combat forms hidden in plain sight with specific reference to Engolo/Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking and Asafo Flag Dancing. In terms of the structure of the article, I will give a background to the topic. Then I will show all of these arts as a dance, as you may have seen them before, and look at the ideas of combat forms disguised as dance as reactions to repression. Then, I will give a demonstration of danced combat from all around Afrikan world and contextual manifestations of repression and encouragement as they are found in the literature. Then I will look at combat applications of seemingly innocuous “dance” movements and, finally, I will present our conclusions and future directions.

## Background

In this section, I will briefly discuss the origins of combat sciences – often inappropriately referred to as martial arts – in the world. As such, in (1) we have a video of esteemed scholar Ashra Kwesi (2009) who expounds upon the ancient Afrikan origin of what is termed contemporarily as martial arts:


1. [https://youtu.be/CZ9fmX\\_AdCM](https://youtu.be/CZ9fmX_AdCM) (Kwesi 2009)

The significance of the clip is that Kwesi discusses the fact that the term martial is derived from *Mars*, the name of a Roman god of war. This is a misnomer given that these arts and sciences existed long before there was anything called a Rome or a Mars. Indeed, the earliest depictions of combat arts and sciences come from  *Kmt(yw)* ‘Black people’ from  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People.’<sup>2</sup> These arts and sciences were linked to the divinity of  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People’ known as  *MnTw* ‘Montu.’ In other depictions in the video, we see stick fighting, open hand combat, grappling, etc.

While Kwesi (2009) goes into these combat arts and sciences from just three thousand years ago, we can go back much further than that.



Figure 1: Detail of the wrestling scenes in tomb 15 of Baqet III at mnt-xwfw (modern-day Beni Hasan)

Figure 1 is a photograph of the very first depiction of any so-called “martial art,” or as we prefer,  *MnTw* ‘Montu’ arts and sciences, or the more neutral term, combat arts/sciences. This depiction can be found at Monet-khufu (modern-day Beni Hasan) and dates back to ca. 3000 BCE. According to Leonard “Not far from the banks of the Nile in the temple tombs of Ben Hasan wrestlers are depicted in almost every position now known. We need but to look at them to realize that we have made no material advancement over the ancient Egyptians” (1897, pp. 4-5).

Thus, it is quite ironic that when people think about so-called “martial arts” they think about Eurasians like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. However, given that we invented these arts, it behooves Afrikan=Black people to think about ourselves.

Much of this research was through embodied participant observation and reflection. In terms of personal background, as a youth growing up in the North Carolina, I slap-boxed and wrestled informally and also got into my fair share of physical altercations. At the time we never thought of these fighting skills and techniques as a formal art. We would look at karate dojos with that level of esteem, but we did not have the same appreciation for our own arts and sciences, irrespective of how effective they were. But in doing research, I found that what we were practicing had cognate forms from Angola such as *khandeka*, and *kambangula*. I began training Capoeira<sup>3</sup> around 1998-9 and I also trained in Brazil in 2007. While my beginning was in the non-contact form of Capoeira as a game/ritual/dance/aerobics/acrobatics, I started my training of Capoeira as a combat science in Chicago under Valentão of Capoeira Akebelan. During the time of my training in the mid-2000s, this group focused on the practical usage of Capoeira. Over the past nine (9) years in Ghana, I have continued this thrust by engaging in sparring and fighting with practitioners of karate, boxing, wrestling, taekwondo, judo, jiu-jitsu, Capoeira and others.<sup>4</sup> This background has placed me in an ideal position to research into the similarities and differences between Afrikan combat sciences of the continent and elsewhere in the Afrikan world in contrast to non-Afrikan martial arts and sciences.

As such, we will now turn our attention to the research questions to be addressed in this paper as listed below:

- Are the dance-like aesthetics of Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking and/or Asafo flag dancing due to external repression, intrinsic qualities, both, neither?
- Were these Afrikan Combat Sciences repressed and/or encouraged?
- Do the “dance” movements have any practical military/combat function?

## **Dance-like Aesthetics of Afrikan Combat Sciences**

In the literature, oftentimes in Capoeira circles, one will hear that Capoeira was disguised as a dance. We find quotes from scholars and practitioners alike, such as the following excerpt from the 1996 *Jornal da Capoeira* thus, “Without weapons or munitions, the slaves turned warriors again using that sport born during the filthy nights of the slave huts, and the sport which had been disguised as dance was transformed into a fight, the fight of the men of the *capoeira*” (*Jornal da Capoeira*, 1996, p. 8 quoted in Assunção 2004, p. 5). According to Assunção:

A number of other myths about capoeira circulate within the different spheres where discourses about its history are elaborated. Many practitioners claim that capoeira is played to music, because during the times of slavery it had to be disguised as a dance in order to fool the slave owners. Unfortunately, all the early sources on capoeira make quite clear that the masters were only too aware of the potential danger of capoeira practised by slaves. Another popular story explains that capoeira uses mainly foot kicks because slaves were chained together by their hands and had therefore only the feet left to use. Historical evidence, however, suggests that slaves had their feet in shackles to prevent them from running away, leaving their hands free to work. (Assunção 2004, p. 8)

Assunção goes on to debunk these and other common myths about Capoeira that are promulgated by authors and practitioners alike. Other scholars articulate similar understandings thusly:

Capoeira in the early and mid-nineteenth century was depicted by travelers as a war dance accompanied by drumbeats or hand clapping. Later the music and the musical instruments disappeared. Police records do not mention musical instruments. Consequently, in the early twentieth century it was assumed that capoeira originally lacked the element of music and was a martial art that the slaves tried to disguise with music, dancing, and singing. The idea of music as concealment was encouraged by two teachers of modern capoeira, Manuel dos Reis Machado, better known as Mestre Bimba, and Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (Mestre Pastinha), creators of Capoeira Regional (1932) and Capoeira Angola (1941), respectively, who believed that the music and the African dance movements were intended to deceive slave owners. Other scholars have supported this assumption. Iria D'aquino, for example, described capoeira as a martial art that African slaves created and developed in Brazil in order to stand up to their better-armed adversaries: Because it developed and was practiced under the watchful eye of white masters and plantation supervisors, capoeira was disguised as a diversion, as an innocuous dance performed for their own as well as their masters' enjoyment (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008, p. 30).

Thus, we find that practitioners and scholars alike support myths about Capoeira being disguised as a dance in the past. In this paper, per our first research question, we will interrogate this idea. When we think of the danced aesthetics, the following examples are paradigmatic:

2. <https://youtu.be/RIN13Zs01tU> (Rica 2009)

In the video in (2), we find Capoeira as it was practiced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. When we observe the practice, the question that comes to mind is “Is it a dance, a fight or both or neither?” We will examine this question throughout the paper.

There is a similar idea of Knocking-and-Kicking being disguised in the North American context. In the literature we find articulations such as the following:

In the performance circles of closed societies, knocking and kicking was performed by two competitors exhibiting their kicking prowess in ritual contests before a closed community. In these cases, the art was performed to the rhythms of drums or clapping or was accompanied by reed pipes called “quills.” Movements such as the cross step, cartwheels, and the dynamic inverted kicks of the art done to music made knocking and kicking inseparable from dance. In these society gatherings, the art’s combative potential was openly displayed among trusted members of a closed community. In other contexts, the art’s martial side could be disguised within dance and thus safely demonstrated in the open. For example the kicks were openly shown in a covert form in a lowcountry dance that to the uninitiated supposedly represented ‘a fisherman dramatically kicking mud off his shoes after fishing.’ (Desch-Obi 2008, p. 94)

So, just as in the case of Capoeira, we again find the same idea of disguising Knocking-and-Kicking as a dance. As there were no videos of this type of kicking dance from the period of chattel enslavement, the earliest we can see the type of movement described above comes from the 1920s as shown below in (3):

3. <https://youtu.be/QXi6qD0IerQ> (MfalmeBwana 2010)

In (3) we see the dance-like movement that resembled kicking mud off of shoes as described above. Again, as we look at the movements, one may ask whether it a dance, a fight, is it both or is it neither. I will return to this for our third research question dealing with whether or not these types of movements have any type of combat applications. It is also worth noting that when they flip upside-down it is very much like the movements seen in Capoeira. We will also return to this point about physical inversion and its significance to the combative traditions discussed within the paper below.

At this juncture, we shall turn our attention to what is commonly referred to as Asafo flag dancing. As this designation indicates, there is the idea that the dance is the primary function of the movements of which it is composed although, this was not always the case. Indeed, according to Aboagye (2010):

Especially after the Yaa Asantewaa War (1900) and the increasing British colonial power and authority, asafo companies were disarmed and the ownership of guns outlawed. The asafo then increasingly focused on political and social roles more than military. Nonetheless, the asafo had always been involved in military protocol such as public parades to welcome visitors and show of force in support of traditional authority (Aboagye 2010, p. 154)

But, this begs the question of whether they were truly disarmed if they were left with the flags as flags could be used for psychological as well as physical attack. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there were, indeed, a few times such as 1887 and 1904, where the British did actually take steps to take away the flags (cf. Labi 1998).

In looking at example four (4) it should be clear that there are combat implications for the waving of the flag although what we see is ostensibly just a dance in this context:

4. <https://youtu.be/QnEiltEB9U> (spirit1284 2010)

Now that we have demonstrated the more dance-like side of these arts, we now turn our attention to our first research question, namely, “Are the dance-like aesthetics of Capoeira, Knocking-and-Kicking and/or Asafo flag dancing due to external repression, intrinsic qualities, both or neither?” In this line of inquiry, we want to again question this idea of the association of Afrikan combative traditions with dance and music as coming from the enslavement context of the diaspora whereby – as the null hypothesis of scholars and practitioners has it – enslaved Afrikans tried to hide their combative traditions from their enslavers by disguising combat as dance. One of the first steps in debunking this widespread notion is to look at cognate combative forms of the continent. What we find is that all throughout the Afrikan continent we find these dances of warriors.

Interestingly, even in the Akan language, from whence the Asafo system comes, the word *ɔsa* is ‘war’ and *asa* is ‘dance.’ According to Osam (1993), such prefixes as /ɔ-/ and /a-/ are vestiges of a now-defunct noun class system. In fact, the existence of such forms may point to a semantic correlation between these two lexemes for ‘war’ and ‘dance.’ For example, we find a similar correlation when one compares the shared root of *n-suo* ‘water’, *o-suo* ‘rain’, *a-suo* ‘river’ and *e-suo* ‘essence, essential nature.’ As is readily apparent, when the prefix changes, so too does the meaning. However, the root – and thus the semantic core – remains the same. By the same token, it is apparent that the root *-sa* found in both *a-sa* ‘dance’ and *ɔ-sa* ‘war’ may share a common semantic core. Another word for war/fight also features in the indigenized term for Capoeira here in Ghana: *ɔko* ‘war, fight.’ Thus, in Ghana, the aforementioned Abibifahodie Capoeira has been at the forefront of popularizing the term *asako* ‘Capoeira, lit. dance-fight.’ In this portmanteau, *asa* is the dance and *ko* comes from ‘war, fight.’

Thus, in a call and response pattern, when one practitioner calls out *asako* the others respond with *ɔkosa*, which is, of course, the same words reversed. While these neologisms, *asako* and *ɔkosa*, juxtapose the dance and fight in one word, as the Akan root *-sa* shows, there may be a shared semantic core in the derived terms from their inception. The main point is that there is a correlation between fighting and dancing for Afrikan=Black people throughout the continent as attested in example (5):

5. <https://youtu.be/QxiH7iUYxK4> (Science 2006, MrSkiBum673 2011, Tekweni 2012, Agyapong 2012, Oswalt 2015, Makele 2015)

From (5), we can clearly see that the false notion that the correlation between dancing and fighting was a new phenomenon that developed in the diaspora for the purpose of disguise is untenable. I will return to this point below in our subsequent discussion on the practical combat utility of the dance-like movements of Afrikan combat sciences. We will now look at our second research question with regard to the repression and/or encouragement of the “danced” Afrikan combat sciences.

## **Were these Afrikan Combat Sciences in the Diaspora Repressed or Encouraged?**

In discussions of disguising Afrikan combat sciences in dance, oftentimes, the general argument follows from the nature of the oppression and repression perpetrated white Eurasian enslavers vis-à-vis the Afrikan=Black enslaved. It is within this context that I will now look at our second research question in terms of whether these combat sciences were repressed or encouraged or whether it was some type of combination of the two depending on the environment and objectives. In other words, perhaps at certain times they were repressed and at other times, they were encouraged.

To start with Capoeira, there is definitely a record of vilification of this combat science. For example, according to the records of Brazil’s House of Deputies for September 1887:

The brutal, dangerous, incorrigible Capoeirista is not he who walks in front of the musicians at public festivities, performing capers and agile movements. He is the one who hides the dagger, sneaks about in the crowd, hides behind the mask during carnival, and treacherously injures others. Those who precede the bands in public streets . . . are innocent lads, harmless, perhaps novices, who carry no deadly weapons (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008, p. 68).

From the quote above, it is clear from the writings of authorities in the 1800s that Capoeira was vilified. Ironically, juxtaposing that description with the domesticated, castrated and sanitized modern form, one would find it difficult to imagine that such a grave depiction could ever have held sway. Yet Capoeira was indeed criminalized and banned until it was repackaged as the domesticated non-contact form amounting to “Afro-Brazilian Cultural Aerobics” with which many are now familiar. According to Talmon-Chvacier (2008, p. 1):

During the nineteenth century, consistent efforts were made to obliterate capoeira by a variety of methods. White people’s sense of superiority induced them to segregate themselves from those they had subjugated, slaves who had brought with them the ancient traditions and cultures of their homeland. Consequently, official descriptions, as well as reports by tourists and the press, of blacks’ performances and of capoeira were merely synoptic, superficial, and incomplete. Capoeiras were stigmatized as dangerous drifters who committed criminal acts and threatened public order, as can be seen in the writings of Barreto Mello Filho e Lima, Plácido de Abreu, Allain Emile, Azevedo Aluizo, and others.

Assuncao provides an even earlier case of repression from one Police Intendent Paulo Fernandes Viana in 1817:

The same penalty [of 300 lashes and three months of forced labor] will apply to all those who roam around the city, whistling and with sticks, committing disorder most of the times with no aim, and which are well known by the name of capoeiras, even if they do not provoke any injuries or death or any other crime [...] (Assunção 2004, p. 70).

Another instance of repression can be found in a municipal law from Cabreuva, which banned the “practice or training of the game named capoeira’ from ‘streets, squares, public houses or any other public space’. Slaves were to suffer a penalty of 20 lashes instead of paying the fine” (Assunção 2004, p. 78). Thus, we can find abundant instances of repression and oppression.

However, we can also find instances in which Capoeira was encouraged, or at least tolerated when its practice was congruent with the objectives of white authorities. In the Paraguay War, also known as the War of the Triple Alliance, the government of Rio wanted to get rid of Capoeira, so they decided to kill two proverbial birds with one stone by sending the Capoeiras to the front lines. The idea was that by all means they would die. According to Desch-Obi,



During the Paraguay War, on the occasion of the final assault and the taking of the Itororó bridge, the Rio constituents of the legendary 31st Corps of Volunteers that proceeded in the vanguard ... realizing they were out of ammunition in the middle of close quarter combat while overtaking the ominous bridge, they removed their sabre-bayonets and they threw the useless rifles away, rushing with unstoppable momentum against the enemy trenches, and attacking their defenders with *arme blanche* and capoeira blows (Desch-Obi 2008, p. 171)

Thus, whereas Capoeira had been repressed previously, in the context of war they were actively recruited, deployed and rewarded for their valiance. Not only did the Capoeiras not die at the battlefield, but they came back with an even stronger military background. There were other cases where the situation was more ambiguous wherein Capoeira was encouraged for those who were willing to serve authorities and repressed for those who were opposed to them. Again, turning to documents from the 1800s it is made clear that at times, when Capoeiras were arrested, upon release they were oftentimes recruited by the secret police. In other words, they were arrested (repression) but then they were recruited (encouragement). Indeed, according to Talmon-Chvacier (2008, p. 82) citing the publication *Cidade do Rio* of December 10, 1889:

Capoeira is the greatest evil the empire has bequeathed us. When the monarch's police decided to suppress capoeira and imprison those who practiced it, the measures were always limited to signing a 'promise of good behavior' and two or three days in jail. After their release, the Capoeiras were often recruited by the secret police.

A similar affirmation can be found in *Gazeta de Notícias* of December 16, 1889:

“In the past, these villains [i.e., Capoeiras] were employed by the police.” A prominent Capoeirista of the time is a case in point: Manduca da Praia is, apparently, a supporter of the government's party in the electorate [...] when the knives, razors and ballot papers are invariably in evidence. He breaks the jaws of the insolent, shakes his fist at the headquarters of Petrópolis, has powerful connections and pulls strings [...] He safeguards our national sovereignty, and makes money on every election campaign” (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008, pp. 82-3).

Thus, we see that, in the case of Capoeira, sometimes it was encouraged and other times it was repressed. We can find similar repression in the case of Knocking-and-Kicking in North America.

The world didn't know about it, but they brought [knocking and kicking] from Africa and disguised it in the context of religion to cover it up ... to keep the white man from getting at it. And that was their weapon to fight with. They couldn't have any guns or weapons to fight with and to defend themselves they had to use something, so they used [knocking and kicking]. ... It was mostly a secret undercover thing for the slave because that was his way of defense. But see, if he could have carried it out in the open like karate and the martial arts from Asia it would have been a momentous thing. But this was undercover and most of it you didn't hear about... over here [America] they didn't pass it around, only in the secret ranks that they were training under them (Desch-Obi 2008, p. 108).

Therefore, just as in the case of scholars and practitioners of Capoeira, we have the idea of hiding or disguising Knocking-and-Kicking for the sake of preserving it in an overtly repressive environment. According to Desch-Obi (2008, p. 107),

The closed societies of families following the Old Time Religion would continue to perpetuate the martial art in the twentieth century, explaining the closed nature of the art. While certain aspects of the art, particularly head butting, were practiced widely in the bonded community, after emancipation the complete art was often hidden from other blacks as well as whites. Willie Nelson explained that “not everyone used to do it, just certain circles of blacks,” and as a boy he was afraid to cross those who knew it. Practitioners at the end of the last decade still used separate terms to distinguish between blacks in general and blacks tied to the remnants of these closed societies.

Again, here we have Knocking-and-Kicking being hidden in the context of very real repression. In another quote from a formerly enslaved Afrikan who was interviewed during the WPA Federal Writers Project of 1936-8, it says,

“[D]ey had to keep de fights a secrete, fo' de owners ob de slaves sho' didn't like no fighting 'round you all see, hit wuz like dis, dey would get crippled up and wouldn't be worth nothing to wuk” (Rawick 1972, p. 1657, Lussana 2010, p. 915).

Of course, the quote above makes sense from the perspective of the question of why would one want Afrikans fighting and then becoming too crippled to do their work? Again, in terms of repression, and preventing altercations, the following quote is instructive:

Each team ‘urged the boys on,’ and fighting subsequently broke out among men from both plantations in ‘dead earnest.’ ‘Men fought all around on both sides, bunting and biting,’ Smith described. An old woman's dress caught fire, and dishes were smashed, while some ‘tore the fences down around the cabin’ and ‘hammered each other with the pickets until the white men came out with guns and threatened to shoot them if they did not stop” (Rawick, 1972, p. 1657 cited in Lussana, 2010, p. 915)

But, remarkably, in other contexts we find that fighting was encouraged. This is evident in the following quote from a formerly enslaved Afrikan, Henry Bibb (1849, p. 23), who wrote the following in his narrative:

Those who make no profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath. This is often encouraged by slaveholders [...] This is urged on by giving them whiskey; making bets on them; laying chips on one slave's head, and daring another to tip it off with his hand; and if he tipped it off, it would be called an insult, and cause a fight [...] The blows are made by kicking, knocking, and butting with their heads; they grab each other by their ears, and jam their heads together like sheep. If they are likely to hurt each other very bad, their masters would rap them with their walking canes, and make them stop. After fighting, they make friends, shake hands, and take a dram together, and there is no more of it (Bibb, 1849, p. 23).

It is clear from these different accounts, just like in the case of Capoeira in Brazil, sometimes combat was repressed while at other times it was encouraged. Remarkably, Bibb's description of the combat of enslaved Afrikans is very similar to what is known as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) today except that the latter is a much tamer affair. Interestingly, such fights were dramatized in a movie called *Django Unchained* in which you see Afrikans fighting to the death (Tarantino et al. 2013). However, in actual historical primary sources it is attested from eyewitness observers and participants that when one of the combatants was close to death the white Eurasian enslavers would stop them. Other cases of what we are referring to as “encouragement” come from one Mr. Finnely who was enslaved in Alabama:

Finnely delighted in his recollection of the slave fights he witnessed growing up in antebellum Alabama, noting that although the ‘fights were ‘mo' fo' de w'ite fo'k's 'joyment,’ the slaves were also ‘lowed to see it’ (Rawick 1972, p. 901, Lussana 2010, pp. 1344-7)

He further attested that:

Deys fight widout a rest 'til one give up or can't git up. Deys 'lowed to do anything wid dey hands, head and teeth. Sho, dat's it. Nothin' barred 'cept de knife an' clubs (Rawick 1972, p. 910, Lussana 2010, pp. 1345-6).

This is what may be referred to as some degree of encouragement for the practice of Afrikan combat sciences within the context of an overall repressive and oppressive environment of enslavement. Again, to draw a modern-day parallel, what Finnely describes seems like a more violent version of what is called now called *vale tudo* 'lit. do all' in modern era combat sports where virtually anything goes. Given the vividness of the contemporary descriptions, it is clear that this type of fighting is not such a modern phenomenon after all.

In the case of Asafo, we find examples where Asafo was repressed while at other times it was encouraged. Datta and Porter (1971, p. 281), authors of an important work on Asafo, state that:

We have not mentioned the military role of the asafo in our summary of its contemporary activities because, today, a traditional state (ɔman) no longer has the power to wage war, either offensive or defensive, having lost it with the advent of the Pax Britannica, and, therefore, asafo companies can have no opportunity of participating in a fight involving the whole ɔman. In the past, however, fighting on behalf of the community was the most important function of the asafo.

In documenting the transition from military to peace-time functions, they go on to offer the following passage:

A semblance of the military role of the asafo can still be seen in an individual unit's occasional involvement in inter-company fights and disputes. The fights now occur only seldom and are of a comparatively minor nature, but they used to be one of the most characteristic features of the system. They were, indeed, a serious problem in the British period: there was, for instance, a violent asafo riot at Apam in 1930, which resulted in the Gold Coast government setting up a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the nature and causes of asafo unrest, and there was a similar affray, involving some loss of life, at Cape Coast in 1932.

At present, although inter-company fights are not common, there is often a strong element of rivalry in relations between various companies of the same town or state; this manifests itself in the way members of one company will provoke those of another by making oblique references, in songs and proverbs, to the past humiliations of the other company. The competitive co-existence of companies may, indeed, be considered a basic feature of the modern *asafo* system [...] The *asafo*, then, is a system of essentially patrilineal military bands, which are localized in their own wards and now have mainly peace-time functions” (Datta and Porter, 1971, p. 282).

Ross (2007, p. 12) gives a similar description of the changes inflicted upon the *Asafo* system in the context of colonial repression:

As has been detailed in multiple anthropological and historical studies, the *asafo* (sa, war, and fo, people) were the warrior groups or armies of the traditional Akan states. With their military roles almost fully usurped by the administration of the British Gold Coast Colony beginning in 1872, the *asafo* were forced to redirect their energies. This they did with considerable success, and they thrive today as potent social and civic organizations with significant political, ritual, and performance roles in most Fante states.

Whereas, previously, the *Asafo* would engage in military maneuvers, colonial repression brought about a focus on peacetime functions. Also, although the text refers to military roles almost fully usurped by the administration of the British Gold Coast Colony beginning in 1872 the origins of such repression may be traced to the Bond of 1844 to some degree. Indeed, even before 1844, Claridge (1915, p. 445-6) mentions the following:

A classic company fight occurred in 1841 in Kromantse, where two longstanding rival companies took the field, after due battle preparations, for a company war that claimed 22 lives before it was stopped by the intervention of Brodie Cruikshank, the British official at Cape Coast, using the Anomabo Militia.

However, in keeping with the ambiguous and seemingly irrational nature of colonial repression, Amoah Labi (1998, p. 114) documents cases of both repression and encouragement as follows with regard to the role of the District Commissioner:

The Colonial administration had institutionalized procedures for ensuring that law and order was enforced. Between 1856-1956 the D.C.s or their representatives often intervened in *Asafo* conflicts applying various sanctions to prevent or put a stop to violence: The D. C.s seized flags they believed to be likely to cause conflicts and they might decide to demolish *posubans*, if deemed necessary. They also detained, arrested, and punished those considered guilty offenders of regulations.

On the other hand, cases such as the following were known to have taken place, which feature both repression and encouragement, to whatever degree these can be considered as such:

*Asafo* companies were also sometimes bonded to secure the peace during the celebration of festivals. Thus in 1889 the D.C. bonded the headmen and captains of Mumford £100. Moreover he issued a warning of imprisonment if they failed to keep the peace. A circular which was sent from the Colonial Secretary's Office said no traditional flags and emblems should be exhibited and disobedience would be punished severely.

Thus, we see instances of repression and encouragement of *Asafo* and their brandishing of flags by the British.

While we have focused on the second research question regarding whether the *Asafo* system and/or associated flags were repressed and/or encouraged, in terms of our first and third research questions we went to the traditional rulers of the Fante who are the custodians of the system. In a series of interviews conducted on 15 and 16 July 2018 with the Oguaa Omanhen Osabarima Kwesi Atta II, Efutu Kurontihemmaa and Oguahemmaa Nana Ama Yaaba, Omankyeame Kofi Benya, Apewosikakokohene Nana Kweku Enum III, Registrar Mr. I. A. Donkor, and Dankwakromhene Nana Dankwa V, Safohen Maame Nyaama, I was able to ask them about the *Asafo* flags and associated flag dancing of Oguaa. To answer the question of where the dance-like aesthetics come from, Oguamaan Okyeame Panyin Nana Benya, interviewed alongside Safohen Maame Nyaama on the 15<sup>th</sup> stated that the movements were due to “sunsum” or spirit possession. Nana Ama Yaaba said that the movements have practical combat applications, while Omanhen Osabarima Kwesi Atta II said that the movements may show joy or demonstrate a dramatized version of actual movements that were used to succeed in war (Kambon et al. 2018). Further, the traditional rulers were unanimous in the view that the flags used in *Asafo* were not introduced by the British, contrary to view propounded by Datta and Porter (1971). These responses gave a clear view that among the Fante, the dance-like aesthetics of *Asafo* flag dancing were not developed as a means of hiding fighting techniques behind dance, thus answering our first research question.

Nana Ama Yaaba gave the strongest view that the “dance” movements of Asafo have practical military/combat function. She stated that in war, one does not stand still in one place and that the movements of the Asafo dance actually have practical and utilitarian purposes that are helpful in combat. Thus, we can see that, in response to our third research question, the traditional rulers from the home of Asafo were of the view that there is a combat function associated with flag dancing.

So, in summary, the null hypothesis about these combat sciences having to be disguised as a dance cannot be taken at face value due to the fact that 1) there was already a strong association between dance and combative arts/sciences in Africa as shown in example (5) and 2) there were cases of both repression and encouragement of combat arts and sciences and – in the cases of encouragement – it would not make sense to say that they had to be hidden from those who were already aware and, to whatever degree, encouraging of their practice. While indeed, enslavement and colonialism are in and of themselves two of the most repressive contexts imaginable that, logically, would certainly require some type of response vis-à-vis repression, at the same time, there was also some degree of encouragement of combat arts and sciences – particularly in military or policing roles.

## **Practical Use**

I have already demonstrated something of the dance/performance aspect in Section 3.0, but it is still necessary to demonstrate whether any of movements associated with these dances/performances still have combat significance as intimated by Efutu Kurontihemmaa and Oguuahemmaa Nana Ama Yaaba in the aforementioned interview. As such, we will turn our attention to our third research question, which is “Do the ‘dance’ movements have practical military/combat function?” To answer this question, I would like to first consider the following video:

6. <https://youtu.be/XSvJyywvNg0> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

In example (6), we have sweeps being demonstrated in both Capoeira and Engolo in a documentary entitled *Body Games: Capoeira and Ancestry* (Pakleppa et al. 2013) showing that they have the same movement. This similarity is expected given that the relationship between Capoeira/Kipura and Engolo can be thought of as the relationship between a younger branch growing out of an older branch of the same Afrikan=Black tree. As they are demonstrating the movement in (6), clearly it is outside of the combative as they are harmlessly using one leg to perform a sweeping move on the ground. We can also find this type of movement in the earliest forms of so-called dance related to Knocking-and-Kicking where, again, although it is shown in a non-combative context, such a sweep may still conceivably have combat applications:

7. <https://youtu.be/FnhS1NT-rXo> (MfalmeBwana 2010)

Thus, it is clear that in the African, South American and North American contexts, we still find such ground sweeping movements.

Notably, over the past 8 years at Abibifahodie Capoeira group has been documenting a lot of sparring and fighting after classes. As such, we have gotten the chance to test whether such a sweep is actually effective for combative applications as shown below in (8).

8. <https://youtu.be/HMmqoTdIeZw> (Kambon 2010)

As we can see, it is very effective when executed correctly against a non-cooperative adversary. In other words, if somebody runs up on you with bad intentions, one can definitely execute that exact same seemingly innocuous dance move with potentially devastating effects.

Another movement is also present in Engolo. This is a single-leg back kick – which in the Ghanaian context is referred to as *anankotikoro* – and which was demonstrated in Angola as shown in example (9).

9. [https://youtu.be/sW\\_tITkqVjM](https://youtu.be/sW_tITkqVjM) (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

In the video we see an Engolo practitioner doing this seemingly harmless movement and followed by Mestre Cobra Mansa doing the same movement. The movement, in a non-combative context looks pretty safe and non-threatening – especially coming from an 80-year-old man. We can also find the same movement in the danced form of Knocking-and-Kicking and in Asafo as shown in examples (10) and (11), respectively:

10. <https://youtu.be/kL4iE0VCEHI> (MfalmeBwana 2010)

11. <https://youtu.be/o7IRKzTmU4A> (spirit1284 2010)

However, to get a sense of the combative application of this movement, again, we turn to Abibifahodie Afrikan Combat Capoeira/Kipura – also known as *Asako* in Ghana – to see if there is any actual combat application to this movement. It should be clear that there is indeed a practical combat use as exhibited in examples (12) and (13), respectively.

12. <https://youtu.be/m8tQE7tMW-k> (Kambon 2010)

13. <https://youtu.be/ggUHbt5O2p0><sup>5</sup> (Kambon 2016)

So, from the above examples, we can see that against an actively resisting opponent, such a movement can be effective. And, indeed, one can observe that this seemingly innocent dance move can be executed to great effect as you can kick someone clear across the floor with it.



Therefore, again one can see that the same movement, when an old man does it, or it is performed in the context of a dance, it appears harmless. However, in the context of practical combat application, it can be very effective for one who chooses to use it this way. It is clear, in this context, why there is a saying in Brazil that *Capoeira é luta pra quem é lutador* 'Capoeira is a fight for one who is a fighter.'

Similarly, there is a bent-over spinning kick in Engolo and in Capoeira, which is called *rabo de arraia* 'sting ray's tail' (*tantra dua* in the Ghanaian language of Twi used by Abibifahodie Asako) or *meia lua de compasso* 'crescent moon of the compass' (*ɔsramfa* in the Ghanaian context):

14. [https://youtu.be/7d2nRsT\\_AxU](https://youtu.be/7d2nRsT_AxU) (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

In the video in (14), Mestre Cobra Mansa is showing this move of Capoeira asking "Do you have something like this?" In response, the Engolo practitioner says "Yes we have that. The exact same thing" "When you put your hands down?" He says "Yes, the same thing." So, again, we want to see if this other apparent dance movement has any effective combat application. The answer should be readily apparent as we see in (15).

15. <https://youtu.be/qpjfmtov0N0> (Kambon 2010)

In the video above, we see a Karate practitioner who, at the time, was a second-degree black belt. He attempts a standing spinning kick but this results in him getting his butt kicked literally and figuratively. This is because, in Asako (Afrikan Combat Capoeira), we are able to attack without being attacked as a subset of the overall goal to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time. As such, we are able to get out of the way and our getting out of the way is simultaneously an attack in and of itself.

It is worth noting here that, while some schools of Capoeira use cords to indicate ranks, this was something adopted relatively recently from the Japanese style of awarding belts. As for Asako – Afrikan Combat Capoeira, this is not done because a person's wearing or holding clothing accessories will not necessarily protect him/her. Rather, ranks are assigned in the context of the crucible of the science lab of testing and experimenting (i.e. in the sparring and fighting). In other words, as combat scientists, we are always testing our hypotheses in live scenarios against resisting opponents. We find this method preferable to saying one has this cord, rope, belt, hat, earrings or any other matching accessories to his or her outfit. As such, the best way to see what rank someone truly has is by providing that person with the opportunity to display their true status in the experimental lab of combat.

To this point, we have been focusing on the combat applications of Capoeira (vis-à-vis Engolo) and Knocking-and-Kicking. We will now briefly turn our attention to Asafo flag dancing with the same research question in terms of whether or not the movements may have some type of combat application. Interestingly, Asafo flag dancing is what inspired this topic as, when we look at it in a danced context, those who practice combat sciences will immediately see the combat applications of the movements in terms of spear or bow/staff fighting. Thus, we will look at the danced context juxtaposed with the combat context:

16. <https://youtu.be/uBeUQh7NpII> (Amoah Labi ND, Kambon 2010)

The practical combat application of the flag dancing seems to be relatively obvious because when Asafo warriors do the flag dancing people do not simply approach them recklessly and unannounced because they know it is dangerous and that they may be hit by the flagpole. So even though, in the literature, it is said that the Asafo were demilitarized and disarmed, if still have their flags, then by all means they still have one of their arms. While this assertion may be dismissed due to the highly technical and mechanized nature of modern warfare, the case of Meekamui 'Bougainville' is a successful modern revolutionary example that shows that low-tech weaponry can be successfully used to procure high-tech weapons whereby one's well-armed enemy inadvertently becomes one's arms supplier (Rotheroe 2001).

There are other types of strikes as shown in the following example, which, again have combat application:

17. <https://youtu.be/1apfqkrDKU> (Amoah Labi ND, Kambon 2010)

As shown in the short clips above, when we talk about this combat practicality, it is part of a worldview wherein when people are dancing it is not always just about their happiness or celebration as mentioned by Oguua Omanhen Osabarima Kwesi Atta II in his aforementioned interview (indeed, one must stay alive and survive a war to be able to even celebrate victory) (Kambon et al. 2018). Further, it is not just that one is simply trying to disguise combative movements behind a façade of dance. I argue, on the basis of the evidence, that this dance aesthetic actually has combat practicality. This same view is shared by the Engolo practitioners in Angola who say the following:

18. <https://youtu.be/jkM4iWDhbd8> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

In the video, the practitioner talks about a tree moving in the wind and how that is also how Engolo is practiced. He says that one is to follow the movement of the tree and as the tree moves one is to dodge because one is trained in Engolo. In other words, if you are being attacked, you have a few options readily available to you. One is to stand there and receive the full brunt of the attack while perhaps attempting to block. Another is to move out of the way – using the retreat as the basis of one's own attack.

One can look at the first option in light of how Western Eurasians used to fight their wars in which one army would line up on one side of the battlefield while the other army would line up on the other side. Then, they would simply keep shooting at each other until one (or both) side(s) is decimated. The other option is more like guerrilla warfare. In this modality, one attacks and then moves out of the way before one can be attacked while staying in motion. It should be noted here that in many instances the principles, tactics and strategies that are available to armies are also applicable in the individual context. For example, the second of the two approaches discussed above can be seen in the highly effective “dance-like” boxing style of “The Greatest,” Muhammad Ali who said “In the ring I can stay until I’m old and gray because I know how to hit and dance away” (Ali 2012). This combat philosophy can be seen most clearly in Ali’s youth when the dance aspect was very practical and useful for him particularly evinced in his fight against Cleveland “Big Cat” Williams. Whenever he followed and applied this principle, he was able to inflict damage without taking damage as shown in (19) below:

19. <https://youtu.be/38sdKOPwerw> (Boxing 2014)

Again, the dance aspect of what is clearly a combative context had very practical functions as is readily apparent from the strategic and technical brilliance of a young Muhammad Ali. He is doing the dance not to hide his combat from any white enslavers, but because it is very practical for him to do so. It is worth noting that while he followed the aforementioned adage in his younger days, when he got older he abandoned it for the rope-a-dope style. From the George Foreman fight on Ali took a lot of punishment and ultimately suffered the consequences of no longer dancing away. This is why it is said in our Ghana Capoeira circles, *Asako nnya nipa; nipa na egya asako* ‘Dance-fight doesn’t abandon a person; it is a person who abandons dance-fight.’ This is to say, as long as the person maintains the principle of attacking without being attacked and doing the appropriate thing at the appropriate time, he or she will be fine. Abandoning this principle carries clear repercussions.

This approach could also be seen during the 2006-2013 undefeated run of Anderson Silva – an MMA (and Capoeira) practitioner – who many regard to be the greatest ever MMA practitioner and who holds the all-time record for 16 consecutive wins and 10 title defenses in addition to a 2,457-day title streak (Murphy 2017):

20. <https://youtu.be/eqTow2rOzb0> (Brasil 2016)

In (20) we can see the principle of attacking without being attacked. We also see Silva demonstrating the *jinga* – a prototypical Capoeira movement in one of his successful title defenses. Again, Silva’s “dancing” is not to hide from enslavers, but because it was effective for him in that it is easier for an object in motion to stay in motion by simply redirecting energy than to go from an inert state to movement due to principles of inertia that were clearly understood and implemented by Afrikan dance-fighters/fight-dancers.

## Conclusions, Commentary and Theoretical Implications

One of the first significant points seen in the previous videos is that Capoeira (Kipura), now primarily practiced in Brazil is/was very similar to Engolo – its parent (or cousin) form – with the main difference being that of nomenclature. While this should be obvious to anyone with eyes, there is no shortage of white Brasileiro culture bandits who attempt to say it was born in Brazil to justify their cultural banditry.<sup>6</sup> Their central concern is that if they acknowledge that it comes from Afrika, then the next logical question becomes what is a white man/woman doing practicing it? But if they can say it was born in Brazil then they can essentially say that they are Brazilian so it is okay. Whether we view Engolo as the parent style or look at both Capoeira and Engolo as siblings of Afrikan parents, in either case, they are both Afrikan. This kinship is expressed in the following clip:

21. <https://youtu.be/RSPNUVv7g3c> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

Another elderly woman recalls how Engolo was done back in the olden days and gives her description the same in (22):

22. <https://youtu.be/gejGfqLWAd0> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

Interestingly, after describing how beautiful and lovely it was, she goes on to talk about how deadly it was in that a kick could kill someone. Further, they would bury the person right there with a prohibition on weeping for the deceased following the adage:

23. “Who dies in Engolo won’t be wept for” <https://youtu.be/9BSb9bZly90> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)


So, for both the old Capoeira as described in the 1800s and the old Engolo, these arts and sciences used to be dangerous enough to warrant a standing policy for what to do when people are killed. This is a striking revelation because in looking at the warm, cuddly, friendly non-contact “Afro-Brazilian Cultural Aerobics” type of Capoeira of today, which was sanitized to get it legalized and to make it palatable for white audiences, it is a far cry from dangerous and deadly. As stated by famous Capoeira Angola practitioner Mestre Pastinha,

All mestres have the duty to make known that it is a mistake to use the hands on your opponent; and if they don’t, they show not to be a mestre; those who have education prove their politeness playing with their comrade and do not seek conquest to sully their companion; it is time to understand, to help your sport, and help to moralize; to raise capoeira, which was already declining (Assunção 2004, p. 153).

Here, we find Mestre Pastinha more concerned with politeness and helping one's sport than objectives such as self-defense, combat effectiveness and practicality as would have been the priorities prior to the ban on Capoeira. Ironically, many who practice Capoeira Angola have the belief that they are doing something traditional but are rather practicing a comparatively modern-day phenomenon modified to moralize Capoeira to give it a sporting image of politeness. The successful promulgation of this image was also echoed by President of Brazil, Getúlio Vargas, who met with Mestre Bimba and proclaimed Capoeira "the only authentic Brazilian national sport" (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008, p. 114). In other words, it appears that the danced sporting component that was necessary to get Capoeira unbanned has – for many practitioners, but not all – taken precedence over the combative aspect that was more prominent pre-ban. In this vein, I argue that the "hidden in plain sight" comes less from the actual period of chattel enslavement/colonialism and more from attributing modern-day ideas of hiding and disguising to the Afrikans=Black people of enslavement/colonial period. This is because in the 1800s we read copious examples of about how Capoeira was feared and regarded as deadly and effective.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the dance aesthetics are practical even if no longer recognized by many practitioners as such. Further, dancing is more than just a celebration. It is not just about expressing happiness – although it can be that too – but rather it is to make sure that one survives by being agile and intelligent enough to attack without being attacked. Following this principle is what ensures that one will survive long enough to celebrate happiness.

Further, I argue that part of the confusion with regard to the dance/fight conundrum at hand is that modern authors and practitioners are looking at our combative traditions from the premises of asking whether they were repressed or not repressed; in other words, their understanding is based on a question of whether combat arts and sciences were concealed or not. However, it may be more helpful to look at it the dance/fight phenomenon as a continuum.<sup>7</sup> In this continuum, it may be understood that, logically speaking, there may have been levels of concealment in places of higher repression. As such, in such a context one would expect that dancing would be more prominent while open fighting would be more secretive. On the other hand, where there is direct or tacit encouragement or approval for fighting in the chattel enslavement context, one would expect that there would at least be some contexts where open fighting would take place. In either case, consistent with the typical Afrikan=Black danced fighting modality demonstrated above, the fight would still be expected to have some dance-like aspects to it regardless. By the same token, the overt dance would be expected to retain fight-like practicality. In other words, while the context and environment would be key factors, at the same time, the continuum type of outlook allows for the fluidity and "fuzzy boundaries" between dance and fight appropriate to Afrikan=Black approaches to altercations.



CONCEALMENT/REPRESSION  
DANCE OPEN (FIGHT SECRET)

ENCOURAGEMENT/AMBIVALENCE  
FIGHT OPEN (DANCE SUBORDINATE)

Figure 2: Continuum of Fight to Dance

Significantly we can find instances in which combat arts/sciences were concealed while at other times they were encouraged as we saw in the primary source literature. Sometimes they were repressed while at other times there a degree of ambivalence or even encouragement. If in a particular context they were repressed, then Afrikan people may have chosen for the dance aspect to manifest more prominently than the fight aspect. On the other hand, when the context was more encouraging Afrikans may choose for their combat arts/sciences to be practiced more openly. However, one must keep in mind that there is a thin line between the fight and the dance in either context.

While we can look at the dance/fight phenomenon in terms of a continuum, we can also make use of binary opposites in terms of the overarching theory and/or theoretical implications. I argue that we can attribute causative factors with regard to transformations in our arts and sciences in a similar manner to how we understand principles of order and chaos in divination. In the Yorùbá *Ifá* system of divination, when making use of the *òpèlè Ifá* ‘divination chain’ there is a binary system in which there is a chance (the chaos aspect personified in the *òrìṣà* named *Èṣù*) that any one of the *òpèlè* seeds may land face up or face down. This is analogous to binaries such as knowledge/ignorance, resistance/acquiescence, intentionality/unintentionality, and importance/unimportance. In other words, there may exist any combination of any of these factors that will, in turn have an impact upon whether a given system will change and how that change may occur. For example, one’s practice of danced combat systems may be influenced by whether or not the practitioner knows that what they are practicing has a combat aspect. If the practitioner is ignorant of that fact it can have an impact on how the art transforms in their hands. Once there is a situation of knowledge or lack thereof, whether or not the practitioner resists what they know or acquiesces will also play a role in terms of transformation (and manner of transformation) and/or stability. Whether this resistance or acquiescence is intentional or unintentional will also play a role with regard to transformation. Also, the practitioner’s attitude to what they know in terms of its importance or unimportance will also factor prominently in the art’s transformation or lack thereof. So, just as one can throw a divination chain an 8-bit binary *òpèlè Ifá* in which there are 256 binary possibilities, so too can there be a similar combination of knowledge/ignorance, resistance/acquiescence, intentionality/unintentionality and importance/unimportance. This discussion is illustrated in Table 1 below:

## Complementary Factors in Transformation

Knowledge	Ignorance
Resistance	Acquiescence
Intentionality	Unintentionality
Importance	Unimportance

*Table 1: Divination Transformation Theory*

As there are different combinations, for example, someone who has resistance; knowledge, intentionality, and understands the importance is a rebel. One who intentionally acquiesces may be understood as a follower, etc.

- resistance + knowledge + intentionality + importance = rebels
- acquiescence + ignorance + unintentionality + unimportance = foreigners
- acquiescence + knowledge + intentionality + importance = followers

The binary chain in transformation can be thought of as analogous to the double-helix of DNA in which the coming together of binary combinations contributes to transformation of living organisms.

It is also worth noting that the association between war on one hand and music and dancing on the other hand goes back thousands of years as attested in ancient Afrika. From the XVIIth Dynasty stela of Emhab from Tell Edfu (1543–1539 BCE) we find the following commentary from Störk (1993, pp. 101, 109) instructive:

Emhab was not a plain drummer, but, as part of the royal army, a royal drummer. [...] Emhab's assertion that he "kept alive" (*sanx*) while his lord "killed" (*xdb*) relates to the result of his drumming which was encouraging and constructive for the Egyptian army as well as paralysing and destructive for the enemy.

Thus, Emhab's stela attests to this longstanding association between with music, dance and fighting.

We now turn our attention to other aspects of the modality of Afrikan combat sciences/arts and why they manifest as they do. In this vein we find that the philosophy and practice of Knocking-and-Kicking were closely attached to spirituality. This is attested in the following quote:

According to Gwaltney, ‘the original use of knocking and kicking was holy. It was to defend the elders [of the Old Time Religion].’ Gwaltney defines knocking and kicking as ‘the ancient martial art practiced by slave clergy and their followers.’ This ‘clergy’ of elders encouraged the open practice only in their clandestine gatherings. As Johnathan David describes them, these societies ‘consisted of cults organized around local extended families that met also in larger, public festivals.’ These larger, yet still clandestine festivals were often referred to as ‘drum meetings.’ The fact that in these ritual contexts kicking contests included physical inversions, together with the continued association of inversion with the ‘crossing of the water,’ suggests the possibility that knocking and kicking may at one time have continued to serve a ritual function in the Old Time Religion by accessing spiritual power from across the *kalunga*. (Desch-Obi 2008, pp. 107-8)

The Kalûnga referred to in the above quotation can be seen as part of the Dikènga or Tendwa nza Kôngo – the Kôngo cosmogram. In terms of physical inversion, the concept is that while we stand upright here in the realm of the living, in the realm of the ancestors everything is the opposite. In other words, inhabitants of the netherworld are inverted there in the ancestral realm while we are upright here, from our perspective of the mirror image. With this worldview and understanding, practitioners would invert themselves physically in order to imitate the Ancestors, thereby drawing strength and power from the ancestral realm.

Also, of note is the fact that, in Angola, Kalûnga is understood in terms of the “All in All” and the ocean. Kalûnga is at the same time the dividing line between the realm of the living and that of the Ancestors. Again, to quote Desch-Obi (2008, p. 4):

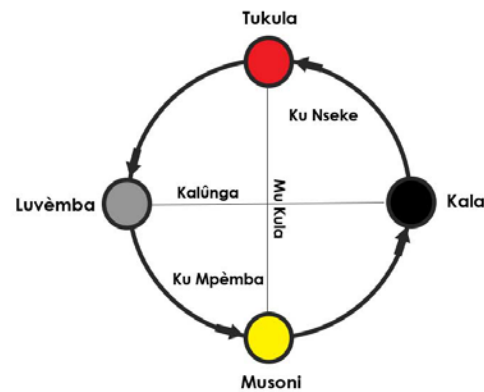


Figure 3: Dikènga or Tendwa nza Kôngo



While living in Angola, I came to understand that the term *kalunga* was used to identify aspects of the natural world (ocean, rivers, lakes, caves) and the supernatural world (ancestors, God, and the land of the dead). These seemingly disparate terms were brought together by an entire cosmological system that understood bodies of water to be bridges connecting the lands of the living and the realm of the dead. In reference to the spiritual realm linked to these bodies of water, *kalunga* invokes an inverted world where the ancestors walk with their feet up. This gave birth to a martial art that relied on supporting one's body with the hands and kicking while upside down. Masters of the art who were forced to endure the Middle Passage spread this aesthetic tradition of inverted kicks throughout the Americas.

He further goes on to state that:

Ultimately the term was derived from the ancestral proto-Bantu term *\*-lung-*, meaning "to put in order/to put straight." Also derived from *\*-lung-* were words for the Creator God, appearing in Njila languages as *Kalunga*, which might roughly be glossed as "the one who put [the world] in order." *Ka* is a prefix often used for people or offices, reflecting the fact that they conceived of *Kalunga* as a singular personalized God. Beyond directly signifying "the Great Bringer of Order," *Kalunga* also referred to the cosmological order that God created. At the center of their understanding of the universe was the *kalunga* as the threshold between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead. Good ancestors were believed to live beyond, or more accurately below, the *kalunga* in an inverted underworld that could be accessed via bodies of water or even through sacred caves. The passage through the *kalunga* was a transformation linked with the color white, the color of the sea bottom or the dust rubbed onto a soul as it squeezed through the small portal in sacred caves. One then emerged into the world of spiritual power, where the ancestors walked inverted with their feet up and hands down. (Desch-Obi, 2008, p. 39)

Because of the notion of inversion, it is also clear from the above passage that while human beings were Black, as shown on the Kala (i.e., birth) side of Figure 3, it was understood that death must, therefore, be the opposite and as shown in Figure 4, a medium who is possessed by a spirit is represented with the greyish/whitish color associated with *mpèmba* ‘white clay/powder.’ Indeed, the inverted realm is called *ku*



Figure 4: Ghanaian Traditional Spirit Medium in *ku mpèmba* covered with white clay/powder demonstrating the pan-Afrikan worldview at the root of various manifestations throughout the Afrikan world (Photo Credit: Kambon 2011).

*mpèmba* due to this understanding. Because of ancient conceptions of 𐏊𐏃 mAat, which included notions of order and balance, some of the movements came to be associated with the zebra – also called *ongolo* – which kicks its hind legs up and, therefore, fights in an inverted fashion and additionally encapsulates the balance between Black and white. According to Desch-Obi (2008, p. 38),

Even the techniques of the *engolo* closely resembled the fighting style of the zebra. The zebra’s combined ability for lethal kicking and nimble defense relate it to the practice of *engolo*. Neves e Sousa argues that the *engolo* was named after the zebra and that the kicks executed with the hands on the ground were direct imitations of the kicking of the zebra. These “zebra” or inverted kicks executed with the hands on the ground were the most distinctive and characteristic kicks of the *engolo*, as well as its American derivatives.

Indeed, both the word for zebra *óngólò* and the word for the combat science *òngòló* seem to derive from the same proto-Bantu root *\*-gol-* ‘to twist, to bend a joint, to bend over’ (Desch-Obi, 2008). Thus, it appears that both, despite disparate tones, share membership in an Afrikan cosmological/conceptual scheme of categorization as can also be seen, for example, in Yorùbá *Ògún* ‘divinity of war and iron’ and *ogun* ‘war’, where words that are different due to tone, are nonetheless related in this instance. Thus, rather than an instance of either/or, we may actually be dealing with a case of both/and with regard to the cosmological relationship between the zebra (representing Black/white, life/death) and the combat science of *engolo*.

An instructive passage that ties in the dance, military, the Black and white stripes of the zebra and *mpèmba* can be seen below:

The day after the boys entered the camps, each was circumcised by an experienced surgeon who carried the title “leopard.” Thereafter they covered themselves in white ash and were called *ovingolongolo* (the striped ones). When the wounds were fresh, elders responsible for the education of the boys would instruct them in history, songs, and lore. Once the wounds healed sufficiently they began dance and military school (Desch-Obi 2008).

In addition to the zebra, Desch-Obi ties the very rise of combat sciences themselves to another animal, the bull. According to Desch-Obi (2008, p. 31):

Younger bulls sought to establish themselves by challenging the dominant bulls as they grew in strength. Thus, the alpha males maintained their status only by overcoming the constant challenges of subordinates and at times reinforced it through unprovoked attacks or threats in order to reinforce domination. [...] Male children and adolescents spent most of their time unsupervised with part of the herd. [...] Once the cattle were settled into a grazing area, the boys used the long hours of idle time to establish their own hierarchy among themselves through matches with sticks. Skill in stick fighting allowed younger boys to rise in the pecking order of the group.

This imitation of bull behavior seems to also be present in the Narmer palette, in which cattle appear at the top and the ruler appears on the bottom as a bull as shown in Figure 5. In Kmt, some of the well-known symbols of the ruler included the crook and flail as shown in Figure 6. Both point to pastoralist origins of power, perhaps ultimately deriving from the cattle connection.



Figure 5: Recto and Verso sides of the Narmer Palette (Photo credit: Wikimedia commons)

Another of the common misconceptions is that Kipura/Capoeira came to be heavily focused on kicks because the enslaved Afrikans' hands were chained and therefore they had to use their feet. Even the primary sources mention rather that their feet were chained and their hands were let go so they could still work but not run away. I argue that this misconception is due to an incomplete understanding of the worldview that gave birth to these arts and sciences. In further discussing physical inversion in *engolo*, Desch-Obi states the following:



Figure 6: Akhenaton with the crook and flail (Photo credit: Kambon 2016)



Most illustrative, however, was the use of inverted kicks, with fighters often supporting their weight on their hands and kicking while upside down. In this way they ritually mirrored the ancestors, as the world of spiritual power was believed to be an inverted one (2008, p. 40).

Similarly, in North America, bondsmen's graves were often marked with iconographic representations of the *kalunga* with items placed upside down, in continued appreciation of the fact that the world of the dead was an inverted one (2008, p. 139).


While Desch-Obi is discussing Engolo and Knocking-and-Kicking in the above quotations, we find a similar phenomenon and understanding in Brazil. Indeed,

In Brazil some ritual specialists were at times believed to hold themselves on their hands upside down, revealing the continued association between physical inversion and access to the ancestral power (Desch-Obi, 2008, p. 5).

Cavazzi, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, describes the equivalent of the *engolo's* inversion movements among ritual specialists in northern Angola. In describing the behaviors of the *nganga ngombo* ritual specialist, he notes that "in order to augment the reputation of his excellency, he frequently walks turned upside down, with his hands on the ground and his feet in the air." Thus, throughout the wider Njila language group to which the Kunene belong, these inversion techniques were linked to ritual specialists who clearly gained spiritual power through physical imitation of the ancestors. (Desch-Obi, 2008, p. 39)

However, we can, again, go much further back in Afrikan history to see the roots of this worldview. This idea of inversion in the Ancestral realm can also be seen in the  *prt m hrw* ‘Book of Going Forth by Day’ (c. 1543–1292 BCE), various copies of which could be found in ancient  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People’ as quoted below:

- Behold, the mouth that spoke is silent; and (as for) me who was in normal position, behold, my form is upside down. (Allen, 1974, p. 49)
- Spell for not walking upside down in the God's domain. (Allen, 1974, p. 51)
- My abomination is my abomination; I will not eat dung, I will not drink urine, (nor) walk upside down. (Allen, 1974, p. 52)
- Thou walkest on thy feet; thou shalt not walk upside down. (Allen, 1974, p. 176)
- I move not for you upside down. (Allen, 1974, p. 212)

The oldest known attested reference of this concept dates to the reign of  *wnis* ‘Wenis’ ca. 2321–2306 BCE, which states “Travelling in darkness is my abomination: I do not see those who are upside down” (i.e., those in the netherworld) (Allen 2015, p. 50).

The ideas of the ancestral realm being inverted can also be seen in terms of ancient texts that articulate solar positions as depicted in Figure 7:

“I am Khepera in the morning, Ra at noon, and Temu [Atum] at evening” (Budge 2013, p. 76).

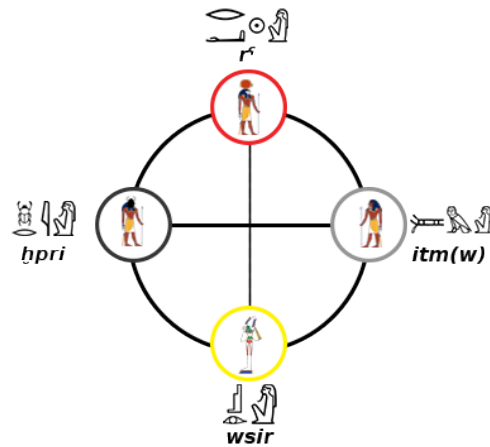


Figure 7: Solar Positions of Kmt illustrated on analogy with the Dikenga framework (Kambon 2017)



Another text states that:

Slain by his brother Seth, Osiris rests as a mummy in the middle of the Duat, where the sun unites with him at night to receive the power to come to life again at dawn. (Allen 2005, p. 438)

This idea is encapsulated in Figure 8 from the Tomb of Nefertari where it states that “It is Ra who rests as Wsir” and “Wsir rests as Ra” representing the relationship of complementary inversion that exists between noon and midnight represented by Ra and Wsir respectively (Schulz, Seidel, and Altenmüller 1998, p. 246, Kambon 2017, p. 25, Montgomery 2017, pp. 94-96).



Figure 8: Wall painting from the Tomb of Nefertari (Schulz, Seidel, and Altenmüller 1998, p. 246)

Thus, from ancient  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People’ to Angola, we find the idea that just as we walk on our legs in the realm of the living, our Ancestors/Descendants walk physically inverted on their hands in the land of the Ancestors. Notably, while in  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People’ walking while physically inverted in the *Duat* ‘netherworld’ was often seen as something to be avoided by means of special formulae, in Angola it was thought that when they invert themselves physically they are channeling the Ancestors and thus derive ancestral power.



Both perspectives, while different, grow out of a common worldview in which the Ancestral realm is seen as being the complementary opposite of the realm of the living. In other words, *Engolo* and the other combat sciences that feature physical inversion as a core element can be said to have emerged from the ancestral paradigm of *kalûnga*. According to Desch-Obi (2008, p. 2) “this art was spread into the Americas under the name ‘knocking and kicking’ in North America, *jogo de capoeira* in Brazil, and *danmyé* in Martinique. Like these daughter arts, *engolo* is based on inverted kicks for attacks and acrobatics for defense.” The connection to spirituality and the ancestors can also be found in the Engolo context as articulated in (24):

24. <https://youtu.be/uOGhIA7feag> (Pakleppa et al. 2013)

In terms of the more conceptual, we can look at these danced combat sciences on analogy with natural and unnatural materials used for mattresses as demonstrated in the following clip:

25. <https://youtu.be/4C9n1dmkOT0> (Ryan 2014)

This is what I call “Kyakya Cultural Displacement Theory.” For the natural substance – latex – when you take the weight off, it goes back to its natural form. Meanwhile, in the case of the synthetic foam material, it maintains the imprint of the weight of repression even when the context has changed. The parallel to be drawn here is that, although we can find abundant instances of overt repression of combat arts and sciences, when the drum changes, the dance should also change. In Twi, this idea is rendered as *Bere dane a, dane wo ho* ‘When time changes, change yourself.’ That is to say, when one is in a natural state and then someone oppresses you, you go back to your natural state as soon as the opportunity presents itself or one brings about that opportunity for oneself as in the case of the Afrikans who abolished enslavement (Hart 2002). However, when one can be manipulated, coerced or forced into an unnatural, synthetic type of mentality, even when the situation changes (even when that change is due to one’s own effort) there may be a tendency to stay in the same position and simply call it culture acting as though the situation that was brought about by repression is one that existed from time immemorial. There was certainly a use for making Capoeira, for example, into a polite moralized sport, however, for contemporary practitioners, we are no longer trying to get white Brazilian authorities to unban our combat science and there is an opportunity to return to more appropriate objectives focused on self-defense, combat effectiveness and practicality.



Figure 9: *Ka i kinènga ko* 'It is unbalanced' in Kikôngo.

The pervasive situation in which the dance has become emphasized over these combat-oriented considerations can be understood in the *Kikôngo* concept of *Ka i Kinenga Ko* 'This is not balance' as shown in Figure 9. This is to say, in the present more than in the past, our combat arts and sciences are hidden right before our very eyes, with their latent inherent potential and effectiveness unlocked. Proverbs of *engolo* as found in the Kimbundu language of Angola include: *Wankya kengolo mutanbo kwapkwapo* 'Who is killed / struck down in the *engolo* does not make a wake' and *Wankya kengolo kalilwa* 'Who is killed / struck down in the *engolo* is not cried for.'

Again, that is to say, that the science was so deadly, that a policy had to be developed for when people died during the course of combat.

However, in contemporary times, for many, the combative aspects are hidden in plain sight with what may be an overemphasis on the danced elements to the detriment of the combative characteristics. To bring about a state of *Kinènga* 'balance' there would be more of an equilibrium between the dance and the combative or, at the very least, a recognition of the existence of one within the other.

This line of thought invokes ideas of propriety, balance and order, coming back to the Afrikan concept of  $\text{Ma'at}$  'Ma'at', which is the foundation of Afrikan=Black thought and which represents principles of Truth, Justice, Righteousness/Propriety, Harmony, Balance, Order, Reciprocity (all of which are highly relevant for combat sciences and arts).



In conclusion, when we look all throughout the world, we find examples of practical modern applications of combat sciences. For example, the Thai military trains Muay Lerdrut – their own art. When we look at the Japanese military they train Jukendo – their own art. When you look at the Israeli military, they use Krav Maga, their own art. When one looks at the Korean military they use Taekwondo – their own art. If you look at the Russians, they use Combat Sambo – their own art. When you look at the Indonesian military, they are using Merpati Putih – their own art. When you look at the Filipino military they use Pekiti-Tirsia Kali. For the Chinese military they use Sanshou. However, in Ghana, specifically, there is a history of the Ghanaian military training Taekwondo – not their own art. Thus, we are developing the arts of Eurasians rather than our own even though our own may be much more effective. In other words, instead of using our own resources we neglect them and allow others to exploit them as you can find Capoeira practiced by non-Afrikans in Japan, Israel, all throughout Europe, America, Brazil and elsewhere. This is particularly problematic as we, as Afrikan=Black people, end up not even knowing about our own combat sciences. In terms of embedded participant observation, the video (26) below is of myself sparring and fighting with experts and practitioners of various disciplines including Karate, Taekwondo, Judo, Brazilian Ju-Jitsu, Muay Thai, etc., and using Afrikan Combat Capoeira to defeat them by adhering to the core principle of attacking without being attacked. This is preferable to the common practice whereby rather than understanding to core principles that gave rise to the movements of Capoeira, Capoeira is rather dealt with as a gaggle of unintelligible movements to be memorized one-by-one until one has a collection that cannot be deployed for any practical usage but is rather put on a shelf as a fossilized pseudo-traditional cultural artifact to be dusted off for random so-called “Afro-Brazilian Cultural Aerobics” demonstrations.

26. <https://youtu.be/2OBpFbTfDII> (Kambon 2010)

Overall, the takeaway lesson is that as Afrikan=Black people, we have our own arts and we should use and develop them rather than allowing them to remain in plain sight, hidden in front of our very eyes and with their potential largely untapped.

So, as we discuss Afrikan combat arts and sciences hidden in plain sight, it is less a question of hiding in plain sight in the past and more that they are in front of our own eyes in the present, but – by and large – we do not see them or use them as viable combat and military options for development and modern application. If we do see them at all, oftentimes, it is only the dance/ritual/game/acrobatic aspects which are emphasized in an imbalanced way to the detriment of the combative side – the oldest attestation of which comes from Afrika. Therefore, I propose that we build up our knowledge of Afrikan=Black combat arts and sciences and implement them to defend ourselves, our families, our nation and our Afrikan=Black race.

## References

- Aboagye, Festus B. 2010. *Indigenous African Warfare: Its Concept and Art in the Gold Coast, Asante, and the Northern Territories up to the Early 1900s* Pretoria, SA: Ulinzi Africa Publishing (UAP) Solutions.
- Agyapong, Beema. 2012. Jason Aryeh Research Programme(Ghanaian Tradional Dance) Damba Takai - (Northern Region).flv. edited by Beema Agyapong. YouTube.
- Ali, Muhammad. 2012. "In the ring I can stay until I'm old and gray because I know how to hit and dance away." Twitter, Last Modified 4 Aug 2012 Accessed 18 April 2017. <https://twitter.com/muhammadali/status/231915869339516928>.
- Allen, J.P. 2015. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. Atlanta: SBL Press.
- Allen, James Peter. 2005. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. Edited by Peter Der Manuelian, *Writings from the ancient world*. Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature.
- Amoah Labi, Kwame. ND. Asafo Flag Dancing. edited by Kwame Amoah Labi. YouTube.
- Assunção, Matthias Röhrig. 2004. *Capoeira: The history of an Afro-Brazilian martial art*: Routledge.
- Bibb, Henry. 1849. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. New York.
- Boxing, Rainy Day. 2014. MUHAMMAD ALI-DEFENSE MASTER. edited by Rainy Day Boxing. YouTube.
- Brasil, UFC - Ultimate Fighting Championship. 2016. Anderson Silva dá show contra Forest Griffin no UFC 101. edited by UFC - Ultimate Fighting Championship Brasil. YouTube.
- Budge, E.A.W. 2013. *An Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Literature*: Dover Publications.
- Claridge, Walton W. 1915. *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti: From the Earliest times to the commencement of the Twentieth Century Vol. I*. London: Murray.
- Datta, Ansu K., and R. Porter. 1971. "The Asafo System in Historical Perspective." *The Journal of African History* 12 (2):279-297.
- Desch-Obi, T.J. 2008. *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World*: University of South Carolina Press.
- Hart, R. 2002. *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*: University of the West Indies Press.


- Jones, Del. 1990. *Culture Bandits (vol. 1)*. Philadelphia: Hikeka Press.
- Kambon, Dr. Ọbádélé. 2010. Part 1: Best Capoeira Fights EVER!!! EXTREME Afrikan Combat Capoeira Fight Highlights! edited by Dr. Ọbádélé Kambon. YouTube.
- Kambon, Dr. Ọbádélé. 2016. Part 30: Abibifahodie Asako (Afrikan Combat Capoeira) Fight Night. edited by Dr. Ọbádélé Kambon. YouTube.
- Kambon, O. 2017. "Akan Ananse Stories, Yorùbá Ìjàpá Tales, and the Dikenga Theory: Worldview and Structure." *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 4 (2):1-36.
- Kambon, Ọbádélé, Mandiaya Sumaini Seini, Mantse Aryeequaye, and Josie. 2018. Interviews of Fante Leaders. In *Interviews of Fante Leaders*, edited by Obadele Kambon. Unpublished.
- Kwesi, Ashra. 2009. Ashra Kwesi Explains the African Origin of Martial Arts (Montu Arts). KemetNu6240.
- Labi, Kwame Amoah. 1998. "Fights, Riots, and Disturbances with 'Objectionable and Provocative Art' Among the Fante "Asafo" Companies." *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* (2):101-116.
- Leonard, H.F. 1897. *A Hand-Book of Wrestling*. New York: E.R. Pelton.
- Lussana, Sergio. 2010. "To see who was best on the plantation: enslaved fighting contests and masculinity in the antebellum plantation south." *The Journal of Southern History* 76 (4):901-922.
- Makele, Mani. 2015. DANMYÉ of Martinique. edited by Dr. Ọbádélé Kambon. YouTube.
- MfalmeBwana. 2010. Knocking and Kicking (Kugonga Na MaTeke). edited by MfalmeBwana. YouTube.
- Montgomery, Akinjide Bonotchi. 2017. *An Examination of Ra Emerging from Nu. Words Spoken by the Imy-Wenewity. The African Star-Watchers Who Invented "Time!"*. Detroit: lulu.com / the Medew Netcher Study Group, Inc.
- MrSkiBum673. 2011. Maasai Dancing and Jumping. edited by MrSkiBum673. YouTube.
- Murphy, Phil. 2017. "How Demetrious Johnson's title run compares to Anderson Silva's." ESPN, Last Modified 6 October 2017 Accessed 23 July 2018. [http://kwese.espn.com/mma/story/\\_/id/20935633/how-demetrious-johnson-title-run-compares-anderson-silvas](http://kwese.espn.com/mma/story/_/id/20935633/how-demetrious-johnson-title-run-compares-anderson-silvas).

- Osam, E. Kweku. 1993. "The loss of the noun class system in Akan." *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 26:81-106.
- Oswalt, Stephen. 2015. Agbekor Ewe Music and Dance. edited by Stephen Oswalt. YouTube.
- Pakleppa, Richard, Matthias Röhrig Assunção, Cinézio "Mestre Cobra Mansa" Peçanha, and Christine Dettmann. 2013. *Body Games: Capoeira and Ancestry* University of Essex, United Kingdom: University of Essex.
- Rawick, George P. 1972. *The American Slave-A Composite Autobiography: Georgia Narratives*. Vol. 12: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Rica, Boca. 2009. Mestre Pastinha jogando - CECA 1950. edited by Boca Rica. YouTube.
- Ross, Doran H. 2007. "'Come and Try': Towards a History of Fante Military Shrines." *African Arts* 40 (3):12-35.
- Rotheroe, Dom. 2001. *Coconut Revolution*. Surrey, UK: Journeyman Pictures.
- Ryan, John. 2014. What do memory foam & latex mattresses feel like? John Ryan Contemporary. edited by John Ryan by Design Ltd. YouTube.
- Schulz, R., M. Seidel, and H. Altenmüller. 1998. *Egypt: the world of the pharaohs*. New York: Könemann.
- Science, Capoeira. 2006. Ag'ya Danmye Ladja Compilation. edited by Capoeira Science. YouTube.
- spirit1284. 2010. Korye Dance Theatre Asafo Flag Dance. edited by spirit1284. YouTube.
- Störk, Lothar. 1993. "Der Trommler des Königs." *GM* 133:101-109.
- Talmon-Chvaicer, Maya. 2008. *The Hidden History of Capoeira*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Tarantino, Quentin, Jamie Foxx, Christoph Waltz, and Leonardo DiCaprio. 2013. *Django unchained*: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.
- Tekweni. 2012. Professional Zulu Dancing. edited by Tekweni. YouTube.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dr. Amoah Labi of the Institute of African Studies for much of the Asafo footage used within this article.

<sup>2</sup> The term indigenous term  *Kmt* ‘Nation of Black People used by the people themselves is preferred to the Greek-derived term Ancient ‘Egypt’

<sup>3</sup> According to Talmon-Chvacier (2008, p. 29-30), citing conversations with Dr. Kimbwandende kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau:

Fu-Kiau’s comprehensive study revealed that the word “capoeira” derives from the root *kupura*—“to play”—in the Ki-Kongo language. *Pula* or *pura* means waving, flying from place to place, wrestling, fighting. *Kipura* in Kongolese means cockfighting. He reports that in the Kongo there was a game called *kipura* in which the players, imitating fighting cocks, created a technique designed to strengthen the body, control it, and achieve physical and mental health and stability.

<sup>4</sup> Abibifahodie translates to Afrikan liberation. More information and videos documenting this training can be found at [abibifahodie.com](http://abibifahodie.com).

<sup>5</sup> No student was harmed in the filming of this video.

<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon described is what is termed colloquially as cultural banditry – see (Jones 1990). Cultural banditry by white American society extends past language to country music, blues, jazz, rock-and-roll, hip-hop, breakdancing, etc. This phenomenon is seen as the cultural equivalent of stripping and raping the Afrikan continent of her mineral and other resources.

<sup>7</sup> Note that even dancing/drumming was also repressed/encouraged during chattel enslavement, notably after the Stono Rebellion in North America.