

# **The Berimbau-de-barriga And its toques**

**Kay Shaffer, 1977**

**English translation: Shayna McHugh, 2007<sup>1</sup>**

**The berimbau is a musical bow used in Brazil with the game of Capoeira. In this research, we will explore its origin and history and describe its present use in Brazil.**

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: All footnotes in this work are my own additions, which I inserted to clarify some points in the text that may have been unclear.

## The musical bow

The musical bow may be one of the most primitive musical instruments. According to the Harvard Dictionary of Music (Apel, 1970:551-552), various types of musical bows are found in many cultures throughout the world, including New Mexico (USA), Patagonia, Central Africa, South Africa, and Brazil.

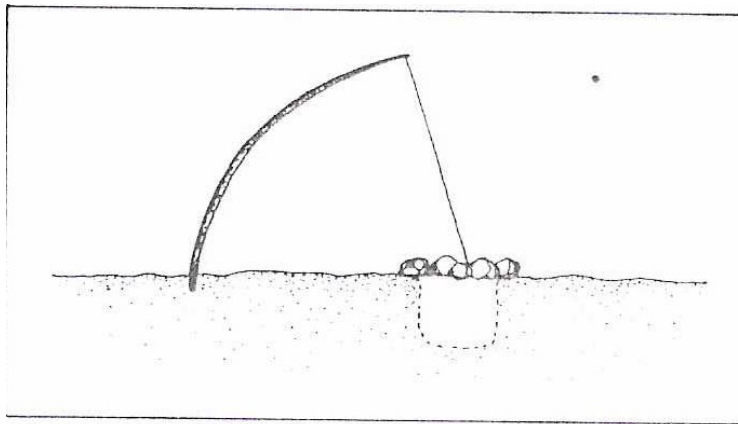
It is believed that the hunting bow was invented in northern Africa around 30,000 to 15,000 years ago. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Balfour (Baines, 1969: 37) proposed a theory that the musical bow was developed from the hunting bow. Soon afterwards, the Swiss anthropologist Montandon (apud Baines, 1969) theorized that the hunting bow was derived from the musical bow. In 1929 Curt Sachs (1940) hypothesized that the two bows developed completely independently of each other.

Although it is impossible to know which of these theories is correct, we have evidence that the musical bow may have existed as early as 15,000 B.C. Cave paintings from that era, discovered in the cavern *Les Trois Frères* in southeastern France, depict a man dressed in bison skins holding a bow-like object close to his face. This picture was identified by Abbe Breuil (apud Baines, 1969: 37) as a man playing a musical bow. Besides these cave paintings, all other evidence we have about the ancient use or development of the musical bow comes from the records of travelers and explorers, mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Curt Sachs' classification of musical instruments places the musical bow in the class of "sitars": "an instrument without an arm and with the cords stretched between the two ends of its body, whether the body itself is the resonator, or needs an additional resonator." However, some forms of the musical bow fit better in the category of "harps," so Sachs' system makes the exact classification of the musical bow in all its forms difficult.

## African musical bows

Many forms of the musical bow can be found in Central and South Africa. Wachsmann (apud Baines, 1969: 38) describes one type of musical bow in Uganda that uses the ground as a resonator. A flexible branch is planted in the ground with a cord tied to its free end. The other end of the cord is held in a piece of tree bark or similar material, which lies in a hole in the ground and is secured by a circle of rocks.

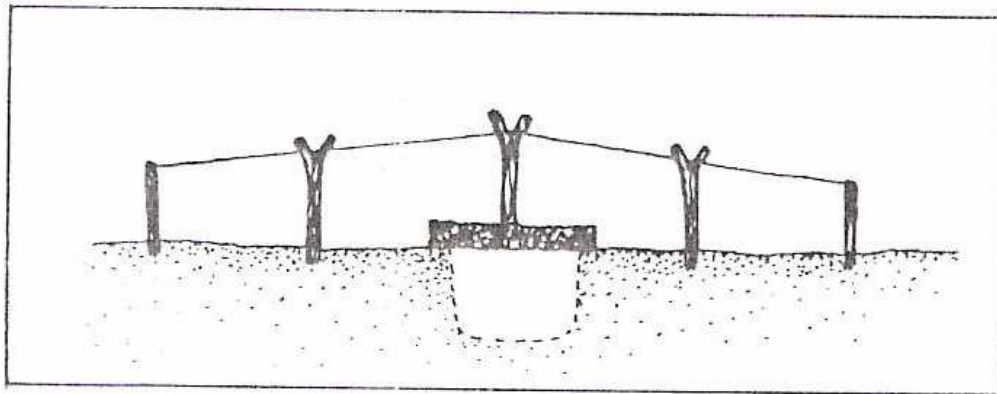


The player fingers the cord with the right hand and holds the branch between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand. He can alter the tension of the branch (and therefore the notes) by moving the branch. This method allows him to play within the interval of a fifth. This range is often

increased by removing the left hand from the branch and holding the cord itself between the thumb and forefinger. Pygmies in the Congo, preferring a more percussive sound, employ a second person to drum on the piece of bark with two sticks.

Sachs' classification system describes a harp as an instrument with an arm and with the cords arranged in a plane perpendicular to the resonance box. Thus, Wachsman shows that this type of musical bow could perhaps be better classified as a harp rather than a sitar.

Another instrument used in the Nile-Congo Basin in Uganda (where it is often constructed by children) as well as in Indonesia and Madagascar is the "Ground Zither." This instrument consists of a sheet of rock placed over a hole in the ground. A cord, whose length can vary from four to four and a half meters, is extended over it, held up by five supports, one of which is directly over the hole. The cord is hit with sticks by two or more people.



This instrument, although it is designed very differently, falls in the category of "sitars" like the berimbau.

Another type of musical bow often used by African shepherds consists of a flexible branch curved into a bow by a cord tied between its two ends. The sound is amplified by adding a gourd or putting the cord close to one's mouth, which then serves as a resonator. This is the same type of musical bow found in Brazil.

## **The musical bow in Brazil**

It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the musical bow in Brazil. Our knowledge of Brazil's indigenous culture before the end of the seventeenth century is practically inexistent, and the writings of the first travelers make no mention of anything like the musical bow. No such instrument is found among any Brazilian Indian tribes today. Some modern sources, including the Harvard Dictionary of Music, claim the existence of a musical bow among the indigenous peoples of Patagonia, but we could not find any proof of this in our research.

In any case, it seems improbable that any type of musical bow was used by the indigenous people in pre-colonial Brazil. At the time of Brazil's discovery in 1500, the Portuguese had already established the slave trade in Africa. With the colonization of Brazil and the growth of large plantations in a country that was exceptionally rich but equally hostile in terms of climate, the colonizers needed a large number of robust workers. They fulfilled that necessity by using slaves.

Initially, the natural choice was the numerous population of Indians close at hand. After many battles, attacks of sickness, protests by the Jesuits, counter-protests by the colonizers, and

decrees giving various degrees of freedom to the Indians, what remained of the indigenous population was liberated definitively in 1755.

However, it was discovered early on that the Indians did not make good slaves. They could not withstand heavy labor, they did not adapt well to captivity, they seemed especially susceptible to European diseases, and they died easily. For this reason, the colonizers began to import African slaves at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, with the partial destruction of documents about slavery in Brazil, we do not know exactly when the first slaves were brought to this continent, nor from what African nations they originated.

Although much research has been done, we will probably never have truly conclusive evidence. In any case, the African slaves were brought to Brazil in ever-growing numbers, and they had an enormous impact in all areas of Brazilian culture.

In summary: there is no evidence of any indigenous musical bow in Brazil. Africans have been in Brazil since at least 1548, and all records describe the instrument as being used exclusively by black slaves (Africans and their descendants). The most logical conclusion is therefore that the berimbau is an instrument of African origin introduced into Brazil along with the slaves.

## The old narratives

Due to the lack of scientific musical research in the African continent and in Brazil until the turn of the century, our knowledge of folkloric music before that time is limited almost exclusively to the narratives of old travelers and writers. These narratives are often superficial or inaccurate.

The only really important information that they provide is the certainty that the African and Brazilian instruments are equal in construction and form, and the manner of holding them and playing them also appears to be the same.

Here are a few examples from the narratives:

### Africa

1. Capelo and Ivens. *From Benguela to the lands of lacquer*. Lisboa, 1881. These explorers made a drawing of a musical bow similar to the berimbau, of the “*bangales*” of Africa. They do not mention it in the text (I, pag. 294).
2. Ladislau Batalha. *Angola*. Lisboa, 1889. “The *humbo* is a type of stringed instrument. It consists generally of half a gourd, hollow and dried out. They make two holes close together in one side of the gourd. Separately, they make a bow like a hunting bow, with the corresponding cord. They tie the gourd to one end of the bow with a string that goes through the two little holes; then, pressing the instrument against the chest which serves in this case as the resonance box, they make the cord of the bow vibrate with a piece of straw.”
3. Ladislau Batalha. *Angolan Customs*. Lisboa, 1890. “A black man plays his *humbo*, a type of guitar with only one string in which the naked body of the player serves as the resonance box.”
4. Henrique Augusto Dias de Carvalho. *Ethnography and traditional history of the people of Luanda*. Lisboa, 1890. Contains drawings of the instrument (pgs. 370 and 379) and half a page written about the *rucumbo* – “The *rucumbo* consists of a cord extended on a bow of flexible wood, with a small gourd on one end to serve as a resonance box; the bow is held between the body and the left hand, and the sounds are obtained with the right hand, through a small stick that hits the cord at different heights. The Luandas call it *violam*. They play it when they walk around and also when they are resting in their huts.” He says that the instrument was “very comfortable and portable.”

5. José Redinha. *Ethnographic album*. Luanda, undated, pag. 85. Contains a drawing of a “*lucungo*, a one-stringed instrument with a resonance box made of a gourd.”
6. Luís da Câmara Cascudo. *Folklore of Brazil* (Research and notes). 1967. He mentions that, according to Albano de Neves e Sousa from Angola, who Cascudo consulted, the “typically pastoral” instrument is still in use from Angola to the east cost of Africa and has the names of *hungu* or *m’borumbumba*, depending on the region.
7. Albano Marinho de Oliveira. *Berimbau – the musical bow of capoeira*. Salvador, 1958. According to Belo Marques, Oliveira describes a musical bow used by the indigenous people of Tongo in Africa: “A bow, under the pressure of a wire extended from tip to tip, which is called the cord or harmonic bar. This is intercepted by a perpendicular cord that attaches a type of small cup to the spine of the bow, which as an acoustic box.” The players held it in a horizontal position, with the cord close to the mouth. They fingered the cord with the left hand and they hit it with a piece of iron held in the right hand. Oliveira gave much importance to this instrument. We admit that it is similar to the berimbau, and may be of the same family, but by the description the manner of playing it is quite different, so we will not discuss it further here.

## Brazil

1. Jean Baptiste Debret. *Historical and Picturesque Voyage to Brazil*. Originally published between 1834 and 1839. Debret, a French artist who lived in Brazil from 1816 to 1831, left a rich legacy of engravings and commentaries about colonial Brazil. Among them, we find the drawing of a berimbau player and a description:

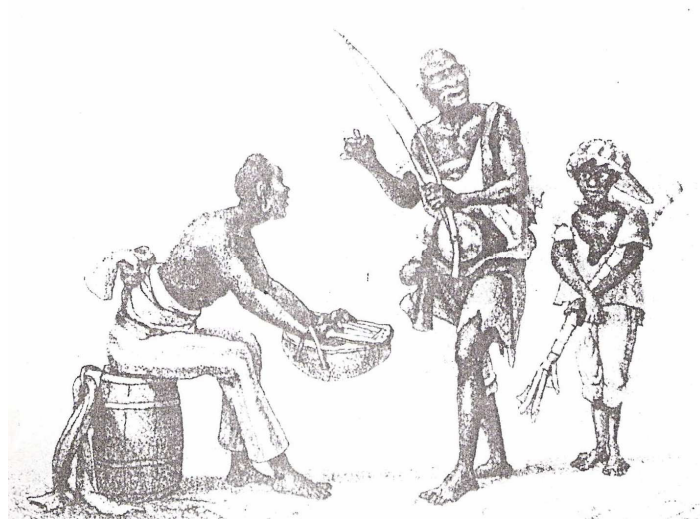


Photo 1

“And finally the *urucungo*, shown here. This instrument is composed of half a gourd attached to a bow formed by a branch curved by a brass wire, which is hit quickly. The player places his hand on the open side of the gourd in order to obtain a deeper, more harmonious sound from the vibration. This effect can only be compared with the sound of a tympani, because it is obtained by hitting the cord quickly with a small stick held between the index and middle finger of the right hand.”

According to the drawing, this instrument is the same as our berimbau. In the text, the phrase describing the player placing his hand over the open side of the gourd makes no sense. The player already has both hands occupied with holding and playing the instrument, and also it would not be possible to alter the pitch of the notes by covering the gourd.

2. João Emanuel Pohl. *Reise im Innern von Brasilien*. Wien, 1832. In his voyage to the interior of Brasil, Pohl leaves us not only a description of an instrument similar to the berimbau, but also an engraving showing what looks like the instrument in the hand of a vendor.



**Photo 2**

The text says, “The blacks really like music. Their music consists of the monotonous shout of a chanter as the refrain, followed by the response of the whole chorus in an equally monotonous manner; or, when instrumental, it is the sound of a cord stretched over a small bow, in a simple instrument attached to an empty gourd, which produces at most three tones...”

3. João Maurício Rugendas. *Picturesque voyage through Brazil*. São Paulo, 1954. Here we find an engraving with the title *Kriegsspiel* (war play or playing at war) that shows capoeira, this time to the sound of an atabaque.



**Photo 3**

There is another engraving entitled “batuque,” very similar to capoeira:



**Photo 4**

4. Nina Rodrigues. *The Africans in Brazil*. São Paulo, 1935. Here Rodrigues includes an excerpt from an article written by Pereira da Costa in the “Magazine of the Archeological, Historical, and Geographic Institute” of Pernambuco. Costa speaks of the slaves’ arrival in Pernambuco in 1645, greatly contributing to our confusion about the berimbau: “The Africans celebrated their festivals with dance and singing accompanied by musical instruments, created and used exclusively by them, and also castanets, clapping of cupped hands, and varied forms of whistling that they invented. These instruments were: the *Atabaque* or *Tambaque*, a type of drum, but square and very loud; the *Canzá*, made of sugarcane with holes in it and the ends plugged; the *Marimba*, formed by two semicircular arcs with gourds, in whose bases they put a bar of wood on which they drum with a little stick; the *Marimbau*, which may be the same as the *Marimba*; the *Matungo*, a gourd with iron pins harmonically arranged; and the *Pandeiros* and *Berimbaus*, which they adopted.” Rodrigues adds: “The *Marimba* described by Dr. Pereira da Costa exists in Bahia,

but in Maranhão I heard a child give this name to the *Rucumbo*, an instrument of the Angolan Africans, consisting of an arc of flexible wood curved by a thick wire that they make vibrate with their fingers or with a little stick. On the bottom of the bow they attach a gourd that functions as a resonance apparatus and, when pressed against the naked belly, allows the player to control the intensity of the vibrations.”

5. Henry Koster. *Voyages to the Northeast of Brazil*. São Paulo, 1942. He records the following instrument in Pernambuco, in 1816: “A big bow with a cord, with half a coconut shell or a small gourd attached to the middle. They put it against their abdomen and play the cord with their finger or with a small piece of wood.”

6. L.F. de Tollenarc. *Sunday notes*. Recife, 1817. Another description of a musical bow that manages to confuse things: “A cord of tripe extended over a bow and put over a frame formed by a gourd... I did not observe if its music was for dancing, and I say the same thing of the *berimbau*.” (Apud Carneiro, 1975: 17). After a clear description of the *berimbau-de-barriga*, he refers to another instrument with the name of *berimbau*. Most researchers believe this latter instrument is probably the *birimbao*, which is a metal instrument played with the mouth.

7. Artur Ramos. *Black folklore of Brazil. Demopsychology and Psychoanalysis*. Rio de Janeiro, 1935. “There is the *urucungo*, also called *gobo*, *burumbumba*, and *berimbau-de-barriga*, which is the same *rucumbo* described by Dias de Carvalho among the Luandas. Today, it is almost extinct in Brazil, just like the *marimba*.”

8. Artur Ramos. *The black Brazilian*. Rio de Janeiro, 1940. Adding to the confusion in his other book, Ramos continues saying that the *berimbau* “is the same *gobo* or *bucumbunga*, it is the *urucungo* from the times of slavery, the same *rucumbo* and *humbo*... stringed instruments belong to more advanced cultures; therefore those that existed in Brazil appear not to have African origins, except perhaps the *viola de arame*.”

9. Renato Almeida. *Compendium of the History of Brazilian Music, second edition*. Rio de Janeiro, 1958. “*Urucungo* or *Berimbau*, the instrument of the Capoeira dances of Bahia, belongs to the category of musical bows with percussive strings. It consists of a wooden bow with a wire cord, to which a gourd with a circular opening is attached. The sound is obtained by hitting the wire with a little stick” (Rossini Tavares de Lima). A coin in the hand of the player enables the sound to be changed, and when the opening of the gourd is put against the belly, we have the *berimbau-de-barriga*. It seems strange that Almeida describes the instrument through the words of another, but he adds details as though he himself had seen it. He also did not give the origin of the word *urucungo*, but it is probable that this was taken from Debret.

10. Alceu Maynard Araujo. *Brazilian popular culture*. São Paulo, 1973. Under the title of “Musical Instruments,” there is a drawing of a metal instrument commonly called *birimbao*, to which he gives the name *marimbau*. There is another drawing of the *berimbau-de-barriga* with the name *urucungo*. Another case of spreading confusion.

This information proves to us that the African and Brazilian musical bows have been the same in all the important aspects since at least the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Origin of the name

In Bahia we find three names: *gunga*, *viola*, and *berimbau*. The Capoeira mestres say that *gunga* is the African name, while *berimbau* is the Portuguese name. First, let’s take a look at the various terms in the texts:

Term Termo	Source Fonte
humbo	Batalha
rucumbo, violam	Dias de Carvalho
hungo, m'bolumbumba	Neves e Sousa, Oliveira
Berimbau-de-barriga	Leonardo Mota (Apud Carneiro, 1975:16) e outros
marimba, rucumbo	N. Rodrigues
urucungo, gobo, bucumbunga, bucumbumba	A. Ramos
uricungo	Afonso Claudio (Apud Carneiro, 1975:16)
viola de arame	Gallet
lucungo	Redinha

We find various similarities among the terms:

*M'bolumbumba* – Angolan vocabulary, given by Neves e Sousa as a modern term

*Bucumbumba, bucumbunga* – Terms of unknown origin given by A. Ramos.

1. The initial nasalized /m/ sound is found in many African words and is difficult for foreigners to pronounce. It could have easily fallen from the word.
2. The change of /o/ to /u/ is a natural tendency in phonetics.<sup>2</sup>
3. The change of the /b/ to /g/ could have been a simple error on the part of whoever was listening to the word being spoken.

In essence, these terms probably represent the same word:

- *Hungu*
- *Humbo*
- *Rucumbo*
- *Lucungo*
- *Urucungo*
- *Uricungo*

1. Here again we find the exchange of the /g/ and the /b/ sounds.
2. *Hungu* and *humbo* are essentially the same word.
3. Among the last four words, in the case of *lucungo* we probably have a case of lambdacism – using the /l/ sound to substitute another sound, usually /r/. Since we do not know which is the original word, it is also possible that we have a case of rhotacism – using /r/ to substitute for /l/. This is common in the speech of children, and also in the northeast of Brazil (perhaps because of African influence?)
4. The addition of an initial /u/ sound can be attributed to the fusion of an article with the noun, as for example we find the noun “Anau” instead of “A Nau” in the Chegança do Sergipe (a dramatic dance similar to the Nau Catarineta). In phonetics, this is called prosthesis.<sup>3</sup>

Our problem consists in the relationship or evolution of any of these words to the word *gunga*. One possibility is that the initial syllable was lost – *ru-cumbo*, etc. – leaving *cumbo* or *cungo*, with

<sup>2</sup> This is a common tendency in Brazilian Portuguese: “cortina” becomes pronounced like “curtina”, etc.

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese, “o” (pronounced more like “oo” than “oh”) and “a” mean “the.” So if someone had given the name of the instrument as “o rucumbo,” the listener may very well have heard “urucumbo.”

the subsequent change of /c/ to /g/ since these are the same sound, one being unvoiced and the other voiced.

Another possibility is suggested by Edison Carneiro (1975: 15-16): “The preferred term seemed to be *gunga*, a form that evolved in Brazil from the Angolan word *hungu*, in which the aspirated ‘h’ (as in the classic example Dahomé/Dagomé), transformed into ‘g.’”

There is yet another possibility: that the word *gunga* used in Brazil today is derived from the Angolan name for a rattle. Edison Carneiro (1975: 16) refers to the description of the berimbau written by M. Querino in 1916, where he says that in the right hand the player holds a “small basket containing seeds,” called *gongo*. Carneiro follows with this thought: “It’s possible that *gongo*, instead of meaning the rattle that today we call *caxixi* and in the old days was *mucaxixi*, referred to the berimbau.”<sup>4</sup>

And yet another example from the sixteenth century, from Garcia Simões in a description of a trip to Angola: “There are many notable musical instruments of the land: a gourd with some pebbles inside; a horn made of an elephant’s tooth; a type of drum; a *gunga*, which is two rattles attached to each other; a *viola* that looked like a few snares together; and a large bell, ringing.” (Apud Trigueiros, 1961).

Here we find the word itself used in Angola for a type of rattle. So we have much material for reflection and study. The modern derivation of the word *gunga* as used for the musical bow in Brazil will have to remain a mystery for now.

## Viola

In Brazil, when two berimbaus are played together, the one with the higher sound is called *viola* and the one with the lower sound is called *gunga*.

Also, in some of the descriptions of the old travelers, they refer to an instrument called *viola-de-arame* (Gallet), *violam* (Dias de Carvalho), or *viola* (Garcia Simões). Many authors think that this instrument is the berimbau. Our first problem is how the term *viola* came to be used in Portugal and in Brazil for an instrument like a guitar<sup>5</sup> and then, later, how it was used for a berimbau with a higher sound. This problem involves a research project in itself and will have to be left for the future. Here I will present a few of the facts.

The first use of bows to play stringed musical instruments is obscure, but the Arabs have had various types of such instruments for a long time. Al Farabi (950 A.D.), an Arab theorist, wrote that “the instruments that come closest to the sound of the human voice are the *rabab* and the wind instruments.” He states that the *rabab* had one or two cords tuned to a fourth and did not have frets (Apud Farmer, undated).

In Islamic countries, this name *rabab* is given to various instruments played with a bow. The *rabab* spread, along with Islam, through Malaysia and Indonesia in the beginning of the fifteenth century, and through Spain to Europe in the eighth or ninth centuries, where it was called *rabec*, *rabeca*, *rebelle*, *ribibe*, *ribible*, *rebeba*, *rubeba*, *rybybe*, etc. (according to the Harvard Dictionary).

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<sup>4</sup> This is unlikely, since in the original text the instrument is named as the *berimbau* and the word *gongo* clearly refers to the rattle: “*O tocador de berimbau segurava a o instrumento com a mão esquerda. e na direita trazia pequena cesta contendo calhaus, chamada gongo*” (“The berimbau player held the instrument with his left hand and in his right hand he held a small basket containing pebbles, called *gongo*”)

<sup>5</sup> In Portuguese, *violão* means guitar, *viola* means viola, and *violino* means violin.

In twelfth-century France, there was a very popular musical instrument derived from the *rabab* that was called *vila* in the old regional dialect and *viele* in the old French language. It was one of the most popular instruments in France and Germany in the thirteenth century. During the Renaissance and Baroque Period, *viola* was the generic Italian name used for all stringed instruments that were played with a bow.

At the same time in France the “latin guitar” had developed from another Arab stringed instrument. In the thirteenth century this evolved into the *vihuela*, an instrument similar to the guitar. Various types of *vihuelas* were constructed with four, five, and six double cords. The five-cord *vihuela*, called the “Spanish guitar,” became very popular and spread throughout France and Italy in the seventeenth century, finally reaching England after the decline of the lute in that country.

This instrument became the modern guitar. In all the countries it had, and has, the name of *guitarra* (guitar) except in Portugal and Brazil, where it is called *violão* and *viola*. In Portugal, the most common name is *viola*. In Brazil, there is a distinction between *violão* (guitar) and *viola* (viola).

The big question is how the guitar in Portugal began to be called *viola*, the name used in the rest of Europe for a stringed instrument played with a bow, and how this name came to be used in Brazil for a higher-toned berimbau.

Again, that is another research project. The only suggestion we would like to make is that, since many of the travelers and writers who refer to the *viola* were not Portuguese, it is possible that the instrument named was not the berimbau as some Brazilian researchers suppose, but instead a stringed instrument played with a bow, like those drawn by Harro-Harring (1865) during a trip to Brazil in 1840, and Chamberlains in 1818-1820 (see Photos 5 and 6).



Photo 5



**Photo 6**

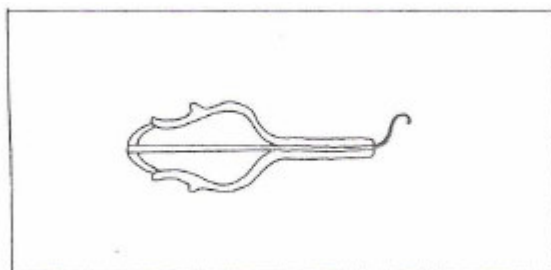
Instruments very similar to those in the drawings are used in Eastern Africa and are probably of Arab origin. Although these drawings are the only reference to this instrument we found, it is possible that a careful search of the writings and drawings of other travelers could clarify this point.

### **Types of berimbaus in Brazil**

Four types of berimbau have been found in Brazil: the *birimbao* or metal berimbau, the *berimbau-de-boca* (mouth berimbau), the *berimbau-de-bacia* (basin berimbau), and the *berimbau-de-barriga* (belly berimbau).

#### ***Berimbau or birimbao***

The word berimbau appears to defy explanation. The majority of researchers say that the term comes from the Portuguese and Spanish word *birimbao*, used for a type of instrument made of a small arc of wire or wood with a thin reed in the middle. The player holds the arc in his teeth and fingers the reed. The sound is changed with the lips, cheeks, and tongue, which modify the harmonics. The mouth serves as a resonance box. This instrument is called *guimbarde* in French, *maultrommel* in German, and Jew's harp or trump in English.



There are various references to this instrument in Brazil. For details, see Curt Sachs (1940) and Albano de Oliveira (1958). The instrument was brought from Europe, sold in Brazil, and until recently there were still some people who played it. The *berimbau-de-barriga* probably took its name from the name of this European instrument.

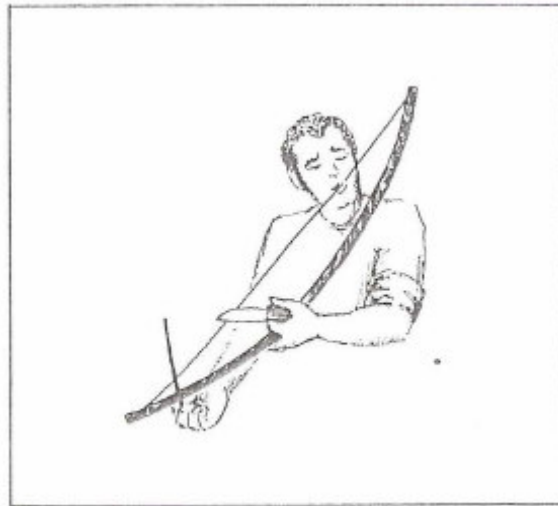
### ***Berimbau-de-boca***

One type of berimbau used in Brazil until recently was the *berimbau-de-boca*. It was a bow more or less one meter long made of any type of flexible wood, a cord made of plant fibers (*Philodendron spp*), a small wooden stick used to hit the cord, and a knife used to change the sound. This instrument is no longer found in Brazil and it appears that no example exists in a museum. In Sergipe, I found a 73-year-old woman whose brother played it. She made one of these instruments for us and tried to play it, producing sounds of considerable volume.

Two cuts are made in the ends of the bow where the cord is attached, passing the end of the cord through the cut, wrapping it around the bow twice, and passing the cord through the cut again. The same process is used on the other side, except that before passing the cord through the cut for the last time, it is wrapped around the stretched part to secure it well. The thinner the cord, the better and sweeter the sound.

The instrument is supported on the left shoulder. The left hand holds the berimbau and also the knife that changes the notes. The right hand holds the stick that hits the cord to produce the sound. The player's head is tilted to the left, and the cord passes between the lips, using the mouth as a resonance box. Modifications in the sound are produced depending on the shape of the lips, the mouth, and the knife which is in contact with the cord. The cord is never held by the teeth.

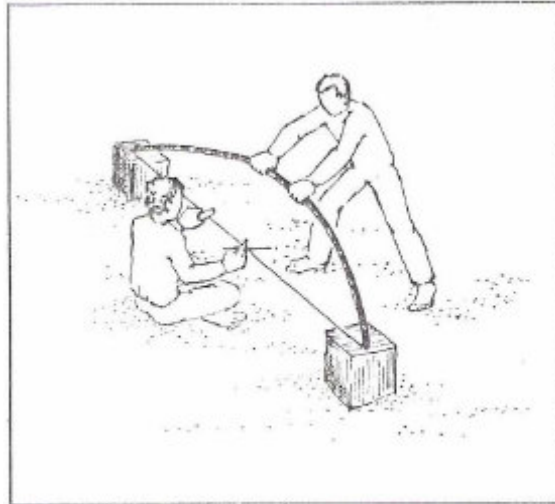
It seems that the instrument is capable of a great range and flexibility, because the woman mentioned above managed to play part of the National Anthem as well as many other popular songs.



In Africa, shepherds often use the musical bow in the same way, but in one recording we heard, the player played only two different notes, and the only variation was the change in sound with the mouth. The rhythm played was very simple in comparison with those of the *berimbau-de-barriga* in Brazil.

### ***Berimbau-de-bacia***

This type of berimbau can still be found once in a while. It consists of a bow with a wire cord, placed on top of two big square cans. One person holds it in this position. The player sits in front of it on the ground. He slides a small cylindrical bar of metal over the cord with the left hand to produce the note he wants, and with the right hand he hits the cord with another, longer cylindrical metal bar to produce the sound.



The sound is very different and pleasant, consisting not only of the notes, but also of a rhythmic percussion caused by the contact of the cylindrical bar against the wire. The melodic range is great, and any song can be played, depending on the ability of the player. The one that we saw played national anthems and popular tunes. The cans serve as resonance boxes. We saw this instrument played in the street by a blind man who was seeking spare change.

In summary, here in Brazil we find four different instruments:

1. *Berimbau* or *birimbao*: Metal instrument imported from Europe for individual use; played generally by sailors and other people (even including a priest who was considered a virtuoso on the instrument). It was probably not used by slaves, since it was expensive.
2. *Berimbau-de-boca*: Simple instrument that can be constructed on the spot using any wood, a piece of cord and a stick. The player just needs a knife to cut the parts and play. For individual use.
3. *Berimbau-de-bacia*: Musical bow played with cylindrical metal bars, resting on top of two cans or similar objects that serve as resonance boxes. It was seen in connection with the act of begging.
4. *Berimbau-de-barriga* or *gunga*: Instrument that uses a gourd as the resonance box. Takes somewhat longer to build. Has a louder sound than the *berimbau-de-boca* and is used to beg, to call attention to sell products and, finally, for capoeira.

### ***Berimbau-de-barriga***

#### Construction

The *berimbau-de-barriga* is made of a piece of flexible wood curved by a wire, with a gourd attached to the lower part. It is played with a coin and a small stick along with a *caxixi* (a type of rattle).

It is fitting to mention here that Edison Carneiro and others, generally citing O. Alvarenga as a source, say that a musical bow was found with a gourd attached to the upper part or hanging from a cord tied to the top. The bow shown in Alvarenga (1946: 39) was one of the instruments collected by the Mission of Folkloric Research in 1938. The caption to the photograph (Photo 7) reads: “*Urucungo* or *Berimbau* – Object #749. Wooden bow with a wire attached to the ends. Hanging from the bow by a cord is a gourd that functions as a resonance box. Collected by the Mission of Folkloric Research of the São Paulo Department of Culture, lacking information about the place or date of collection. Main instrument of Capoeira in Bahia” (Germano Graeser).

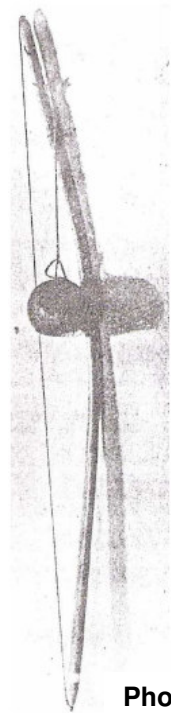


Photo 7

It seems to us that the researchers, who thought that this photograph represented a different type of berimbau, did not know the instrument well enough. Let's look at the facts:

1. A gourd hanging from a cord as in the photograph could never serve as a resonance box (the only thing it could possibly do in that position is inconvenience the player). As can be seen in the photograph, there is a little cord loop passing through the gourd, and a longer cord is tied to it. As we will see a bit later, this small cord is the normal cord of the gourd with which it is attached to the berimbau. The correct interpretation of the photograph is probably that, when the berimbau was collected, someone took off the gourd and tied it to the berimbau so that it would not get lost. Later, the berimbau was put into the museum in that state.
2. When a berimbau is not being used, it is common practice to remove the gourd and put it on the top of the instrument (Photo 8).

According to the facts above, it seems to us that there never existed any type of berimbau played with the gourd attached to the upper part of the berimbau. Based on the drawings, the basic construction of the berimbau has been the same for over a century.

### The Wood

Until the time of Mestre Pastinha (who was born in 1889), “a branch of strong wood” was used. Later, many of the authors who wrote about the berimbau cite *pau-pombo* (*Tapirira guianensis*) as the species of wood.

Since at least the time of Pastinha, *biriba* has been the wood used for the berimbau. In fact, we doubt if *pau-pombo* was ever really used. All the mestres we interviewed said that this wood breaks easily and does not work for making berimbaus. It is possible that *pau-pombo* was used back in the days when the cord was made of plant fibers rather than *arame*, and that the great tension of the steel wire forced the players to look for a stronger wood.

### Preparation of the wood

In the old days, the *biriba* was cut in the forest. Today, it is generally bought in lumberyards in “sections” of more or less two meters. *Biriba* has been exploited so much that it is already becoming hard to find and its price is relatively elevated. The straightest “sections” are selected and the best part of each is chosen for the berimbau. Sometimes one end or the other is cut off; other times both ends are cut and the middle part is used for the berimbau.

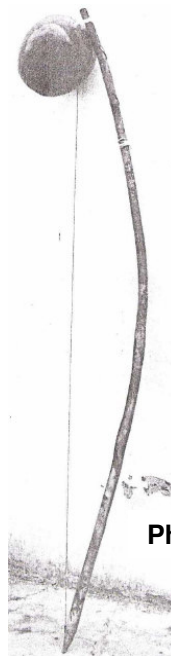


Photo 8

The length differs a bit from mestre to mestre, with the most common being seven palm-lengths. Some of the mestres give the following measurements for their berimbaus:

- Mestre Pastinha: In the interview, 1.10-1.20m; in his book 1.50m
- Mestre Canjiquinha: Seven palm-lengths
- Mestre Eziquiel: Seven palm-lengths
- Mestre Waldemar: Seven palm-lengths, or 1.18-1.20m

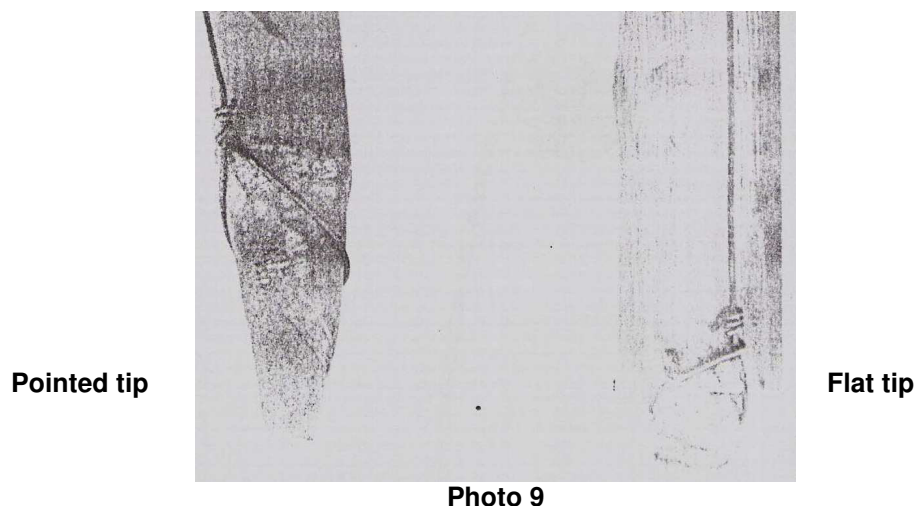
The mestres say that this length gives the most beautiful sound.

The bark is easily stripped from the wood: Start peeling the bark on one end and remove it with a knife or simply pull it with your hand, and it comes off in long strips.

After this, the wood is sanded and painted by the majority of the mestres. Mestre Canjiquinha rubs it with animal fat, leaves it overnight, then passes it through fire the next day, “so that it doesn’t sprout.”

#### Connection to the arame

In the old days, the bow was cut with the top end flat and the bottom end pointed. Mestre Bimba makes his berimbaus like this, and some of his ex-students continue doing so to this day. All the other mestres cut the bottom tip flat like in Photo 9.



**Photo 9**

When I asked Mestre Waldemar, who makes the majority of the berimbaus for the Mercado Modelo in Salvador, Bahia, why he does it this way, he responded: “Because it’s more civilized.” When asked to explain, he said that in the old days during the era of problems with the police, the berimbau – which was made with a pointed tip – could be unstrung and used as a weapon. The new flat-tipped version began to be used after the problems with the police ended. All the capoeiristas who learned after this time period only know the second type.

Today, we find three groups of Berimbau players:

1. Those who remember and use the first type – limited almost exclusively to Mestre Pastinha, Mestre Waldemar, and probably Mestre Caiçara.<sup>6</sup>
2. Those who saw the first type, or know that it was used, but never used it, like Mestre Canjiquinha.

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<sup>6</sup> The author gives contradictory information here, since she has just said that Waldemar uses the flat-tipped kind. Later on she says that Mestre Eziquiel is the “only one” who still uses the pointed type. I am not sure what is going on here.

3. Those who never saw the first type, nor know of its existence – this includes the majority of capoeiristas in Bahia nowadays.

It is notable that Mestre Eziquiel, who learned to make the pointed type with Mestre Bimba, is the only one we know who still uses this construction today. Even so, in conversation with him, it seems he does not know the old use of the pointed berimbau. It is also interesting to note the construction of the Berimbau featured in Alvarenga's book (Photo 7): it is pointed like the berimbaus made by Bimba.

A circle of leather is placed on top of the bow so that the *aramé* does not cut into the wood. It is usually secured by two nails on the sides of the area through which the *aramé* will pass:

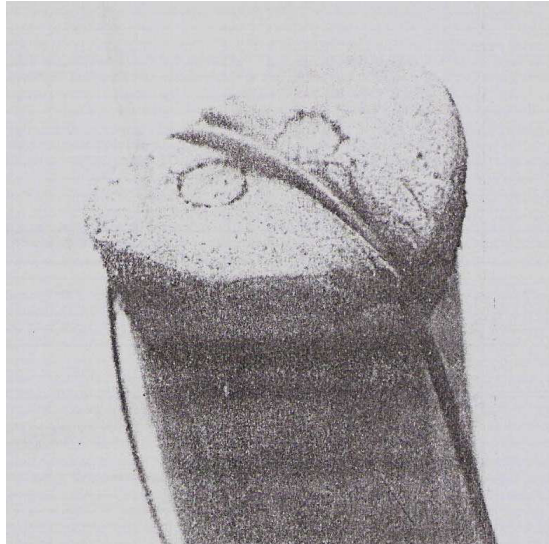


Photo 10

The book *Artistic Education* by Vieira Moura and Deckers gives instructions on building a berimbau. It says to make a cut in the two ends, wrapping the *aramé* and passing it through the cut. This method, although it might be easy for children, would not stand much pressure, and we never saw it used in the construction of berimbaus in Bahia.

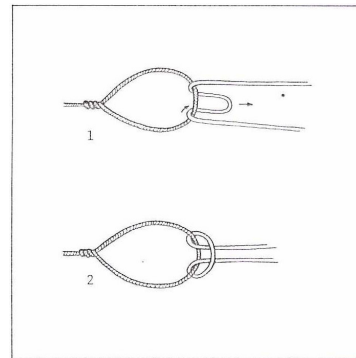
## The *aramé*

It seems that originally and even recently (1920-1930), the cord used on the berimbau was made of natural material: plant fibers or wool. The earliest *aramés* were made from common fence wire. After motor vehicles became common, the *aramé* found in tires became commonly used by capoeiristas.

Capoeiristas find old tires and cut the rubber until finding the beginning of the *aramé*, then unwind it, giving 15-17 meters of wire. They remove the remaining rubber with a knife and sand the *aramé* to clean it completely. To preserve the *aramé* from rust, some mestres apply a little oil weekly and sand it every fifteen days.

On one end they make a loop of the right size to fit exactly on the peg cut on the bottom part of the berimbau – or of approximately 2 cm to fit on the end of the pointed berimbau. This loop is placed on the bottom of the berimbau and a piece of *aramé* of the same length as the bow plus approximately two palm-lengths (approximately 40-45 cm) is measured. A second, smaller loop is made on this end, and the *aramé* is cut.

One mestre we interviewed made the loops by using two differently-sized locks on the window of his academy, wrapping the *aramé* around them. Others make the loops by hand without utilizing any standard measurement. After making the loops, a piece of twine or thick cord is tied through the smaller loop as shown on the right. A knot is tied in the other end of the cord.



Mestre Ezikiel, different from the others, puts the cord on a short *aramé* and pulls it through a block of “earthen wax” until it becomes rather hard. Then he removes it and puts it on the *aramé* of the berimbau.

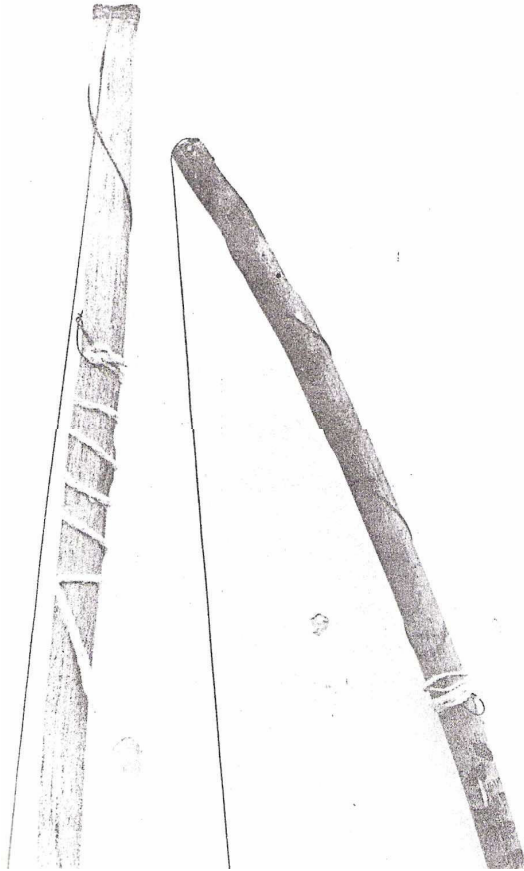


Photo 11

Some people wrap the *aramé* and cord around the bow as shown on the right in Photo 11. This is sufficient to secure the *aramé* well. Others do it as shown on the left. This is the method used by Mestre Ezikiel, who says that the wax makes it less likely to slip. Other, older mestres think the use of the wax is ridiculous and completely unnecessary.

The free end of the cord is tucked under the last wrap to secure it.

The tension of the *aramé* should be that which gives the best sound, and this is learned only with experience.

Today, some mestres still use steel *aramé* removed from tires, but more and more are using steel *aramé* bought in rolls. The quality is the same or better, and this eliminates all the work of taking it out of a tire and cleaning it. Generally, the mestres who still teach or give shows need little *aramé* and still take it from tires. The ones who make berimbaus in large quantities to sell generally use *aramé* from rolls.

## The gourd

A gourd attached to the berimbau serves as a resonance box and amplifies the sound of the instrument. The two types of gourds most commonly used are those called *cabaça*, which have the shape of two balls together, and those called *coité*, which are oval.

After drying the gourd well, a circular hole is cut in it, the seeds are removed, and the entire gourd is cleaned outside and inside. It is sanded in order to clean it further and to smooth the mouth, which is generally ragged from the cutting. Two holes are made on the side opposite the opening, with the distance between the holes being the width of the berimbau’s bow. The gourd is painted

and a cord is threaded through the holes and through a small piece of leather to protect the gourd from the cord.

Some mestres put leather only on the gourds with thinner shells; others put it on all of them. The loop of the cord is made as small as possible, allowing only enough space to insert one's finger when the instrument is held. The longer the cord, the looser the gourd, the worse the sound, and the harder it is to hold the berimbau.

The size of the gourd and the opening of the mouth will have an important influence on the quality of the sound. The size must be right for the length of the berimbau. If it is too small, it will give a weak sound without much resonance, and if it is too big the sound will be fuzzy and it will be impossible to make the "wahwah" sound characteristic of the instrument.

## The *caxixi*

The *caxixi* is a small basket made of vegetable fibers and used as a rattle. The origin of its name is still unknown. The origin of the instrument and its inclusion in Capoeira are even more mysterious, as we have no knowledge of any similar instrument in Africa or among the Brazilian Indians.

In none of the writings of the travelers in Africa or Brazil do we find a description of the *caxixi*.<sup>7</sup> Even in recent authors like Artur Ramos, the *caxixi* is not mentioned when the berimbau is described. Did these people fail to notice the rattle, or was it not used? It does not appear at all in the drawings of the berimbau up until the nineteenth century. It seems that the *caxixi* was a late addition to the berimbau and occurred only here in Brazil. Despite not being mentioned in the records, it must have been used in Brazil since the end of the last century, since Mestre Pastinha (born in 1889) never saw the berimbau without the *caxixi*.

The *caxixi* is also not used for anything outside the berimbau, except in *candomblé*. We only find three sources that mention this use: Rego (1968: 87) writes that Cascudo (1962: 200) says that he saw the *caxixi* used in *candomblé*. Edison Carneiro (1961: 181, 184, 105, 109) has four references to it:

*Caxixi (noun). Small sack of woven straw that contains wild banana tree seeds, used by the candomblés of Angola to accompany certain songs, especially ingorôssi.*

*Ingorossi (noun). A prayer of the Angola "nation." The "tatá," shaking a "caxixi," stands in the middle of the initiates, who hit their open hands over their mouths, responding to the solo.*

*In the nagô and jeje candomblés, the chief adds to the orchestra the sound of the adjá, one or two long bells that help the orixá to manifest itself when shaken by the ear of the initiate. In the Angola or Congo candomblés, it is the sound of the caxixi, a small sack of woven straw filled with seeds.*

*The candomblés of Angola and Congo greet the inkices<sup>8</sup> together with a melancholy liturgy called the "ingorôssi," which is composed of over thirty different songs.*

*The "muzenzas" [initiates] sit around the "tatá" who sings the solo with a caxixi in hand and the chorus responds with shouts inter-cut with small slaps on the mouth.*

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<sup>7</sup> Manuel Querino definitely mentioned the *caxixi* along with the berimbau in his 1916 narrative, though he called the *caxixi* by the name of *gongo*. See footnote 4.

<sup>8</sup> These are the *Nkisis*, the gods of the Bantu/Angola nations of *candomblé*. In the Ketu nations the gods are called *orixás*, and in the Jeje nations they are called *Voduns*.

We do not know if this use of *caxixi* in *candomblé* continues today or not. Mestre Canjiquinha, whose sister is a *mãe-de-santo*, said that it would only be possible in *candomblé de caboclo* [of the Bantu/Angola nation]. He had never seen it used in any other type of *candomblé* with which he is familiar.

In summary: either the observers of berimbau players did not notice the *caxixi*, or its use is relatively recent, beginning in the mid-to-late 1800s.

### Description of the *caxixi*

The *caxixi* is a small woven basket with a circle or square of gourd as its base and a handle on the top. Inside, it contains something to produce sound when it hits against the piece of gourd, like a rattle. The material inside the *caxixi* differs from mestre to mestre and from time to time. According to Alvarenga (1946: 374-375), it contained seeds of wild banana trees or corn, shells, or pebbles. Mestre Pastinha said in his book that it contains “dry seeds.” The *caxixis* bought with berimbaus in the Mercado Modelo come from the São Joaquim Market and contain seashells. Mestre Eziquiel buys these *caxixis*, removes the shells, and puts in seeds.

All the *caxixis* are made “on the other side” (of the bay) in cities like Santo Estêvão; none are made in Salvador. They are sold in the São Joaquim Market, where all mestres and instrument makers buy them. All the mestres who I spoke to remove the seashells and put in something else that gives a better sound.

### The coin

The player holds a coin in the left hand and uses it to change the tone of the berimbau. The old writings offer no evidence that a coin was used. The drawings of Débret (and others) show what appears to be the use of a finger of the left hand, and the texts speak only of the use of the fingers on the cord.

First of all, we can reject this information as useless, because it would be impossible to play the berimbau with the finger. Anyone can try and see that if you put your finger against the cord, it is impossible to produce any sound. The only possibility is that the berimbau players of the old days used something that was not noticed by the travelers. Let's examine some possibilities.

Today, the mestres and berimbau players use a copper coin of 40 *réis*,<sup>9</sup> a coin that they call *vintém* or *dobrão*. This coin can still be found in markets and fairs where there are sellers of old coins. One of the mestres said that, back when the real was the unit of currency, it was almost impossible for a berimbau player to use a *dobrão* (40-*réis* coin) or even a *vintém* (20-*réis* coin) to play his instrument, as these coins were far too valuable to be used just for music. So the objects most commonly used to play the berimbau were metal lighters, beach stones that had been well-polished by the sea, or even the left thumbnail, in the case of great necessity.

It is still possible to find boys in the Mercado Modelo playing berimbau with beach stones. We only saw the use of the thumbnail once, when Mestre Canjiquinha demonstrated how it was done when he was a boy. For those who know how to do it, it gives a sound almost equal to that of a coin.

All the players said that the washers sold with all the berimbaus of the Mercado Modelo do not work because they are made of iron, and “iron with iron” (that is, the washer against the *arame*)

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<sup>9</sup> The *real* (plural: *réis*) was Brazil's unit of currency from colonial times until 1942, when it was replaced by the *cruzeiro*. Then in 1994, it was changed to the modern *real* (plural: *reais*).

gives an ugly sound (though the argument makes no sense, since the *arame* is made of steel!) In any case, for some reason, the washer really does give a much worse sound compared to that of the copper coin.

Today, the use of the *dobrão* is an important part of the “equipment” of the professional berimbau player. At the beginning of the century and until the 1942 currency change to the *cruzeiro*, its use was a sign of social prestige and wealth. In the nineteenth century and earlier, few people could have afforded to use a *vintém*, and certainly not a slave.

It is probable that a rock and/or the thumbnail were used in those days and simply not observed by the travelers. The choice of the *dobrão* as opposed to any other coin is probably due to its large size, which makes it easier to hold.

## **The *vareta***

The *vareta*, commonly called “*vaqueta*” by many of the mestres of Bahia, is made of a piece of *biriba* around 40 cm long. The end held in the hand is slightly thicker than the other end. It is made from the leftover “section” of *biriba* from which the berimbau bow is cut. This leftover piece can be divided lengthwise into four pieces or more. After the pieces are cut to the right size, they are sanded and varnished.

## **Painting**

Painting berimbaus is a recent invention. Until 1940, all berimbaus were natural colors and many of them did not even have the bark removed. We do not know who was the first person to remove the bark and varnish the berimbau, but Mestre Bimba at least has done this for a long time. It is well known among the Mestres that the first person to paint a berimbau was Mestre Waldemar da Paixão. He himself says, “I invented the painting. I made a very good berimbau named Azulão [Big Blue]. It was painted blue.”

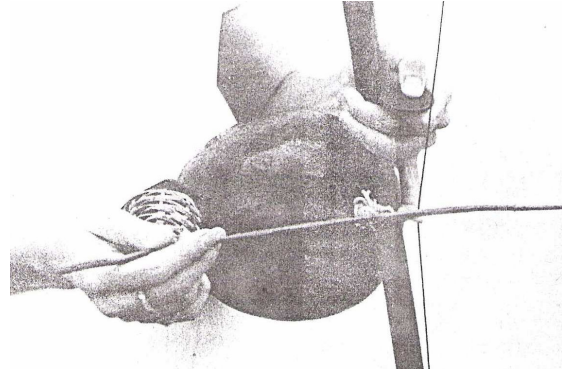
He also says, “It was me who made berimbaus big in Bahia.” This is also true. In 1942, he began to make berimbaus to sell, and invented a special way to paint them. The trend of painting berimbaus “caught on” and all the mestres since that time have painted their berimbaus. The only exception was Mestre Bimba, who continued using only clear varnish on his berimbaus, leaving the natural color of the wood. He explained to his student Mestre Eziquiel that the slaves used only varnish, so he made his the same way.

The colors used by each mestre and academy have always been different, based in the preferences of each individual. The only one who gave a further reason for his choice was Mestre Eziquiel, who uses bright colors, which he calls “modern” – he says that according to his research and theories, the Brazilian Indians influenced the slaves, and the Indians liked bright colors, even painting their own bodies. The Africans too liked bright colors. This is why he feels that it is better and more authentic to paint the berimbau.

## The whole instrument and the technique of holding it

Now let's see how the parts come together. The *arame* is attached to the bow as described previously. Then, the lower part of the *arame* is squeezed with the hand so that the *cabaça* can be slid on, with the back of the gourd being against the bow.

The instrument is tuned by adjusting the position of the *cabaça*. The higher the *cabaça*, the higher the sound; the lower the *cabaça*, the lower the sound. There are generally one or two points that give the best sound; all others give a sound of low quality. After attaching the *cabaça*, the instrument is ready to be played. It is held in the left hand, with the pinky finger under the *cabaça*'s cord and the middle and ring fingers holding the bow. The coin is held between the thumb and forefinger.



The handle of the *caxixi* is placed around the third and fourth fingers of the right hand, with the *caxixi* held in the palm of the hand. Mestre Pastinha and his students put the handle around the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> fingers. He talks about this in his book, and it can be observed in photographs taken in his academy. There must be some people who still hold the *caxixi* in this way today, but we did not meet any.

The *vareta* is held by the right forefinger and thumb and rests on the middle finger, more or less like a pencil.

## The Mercado Modelo

Tourists can find berimbaus for sale in many of the stands at the Mercado Modelo. It is one of the most popular products, and the evidence of this is the frequency with which berimbaus are seen in cars with out-of-state license plates, in the hands of people in the street, in the bus station, etc.

The majority of these berimbaus are made by Mestre Waldemar da Paixão, in the neighborhood of Liberdade in Salvador. There, along with various boys who work for him, he produces hundreds of berimbaus every week. As we explained, it was Mestre Waldemar who began the sale of berimbaus in Bahia. In 1942, he began to sell them in the old Água de Meninos market. After a fire destroyed it and the current Mercado Modelo was built, Waldemar continued to sell berimbaus in this new place.

Today, he makes three types, which he classifies as:

1. Special berimbau: Seven palm-lengths (1.18-1.20m)
2. Common berimbau: Approximately 1.10m
3. Kids' berimbau: Smaller

The painting for each type is different, and when we asked how he chose those particular colors, he responded, "It is my tradition." The larger the berimbau, the higher its price.

Until recently, the *arame* he used was taken from tires. Now he uses only *arame* bought in large rolls, since it is more convenient for the mass production of berimbaus.

Waldemar uses *biriba* for his berimbaus – and we know this because we witnessed it – but other mestres of the city say that he makes "berimbaus out of broomsticks." It is interesting that they also say that, if they had started to sell berimbaus back when Waldemar did, they would be rich today.

Although the wood is the right type, it is obvious that these mass-produced berimbaus are less than perfect in other details. The *arame* is tied with a thin piece of string instead of a strong cord. The *cabaça* is of any size and is often huge, which looks pretty when hung on a wall but does not give a good sound. The “coin” sold with the berimbau is a common washer.

Mestre Waldemar is the largest producer, but there are other people who also make berimbaus to sell. When we took a survey in February 1977, the second place vendor was Mr. Odimário, who has his own souvenir stand and also sells berimbaus to other shops. He has three people who work for him, building berimbaus. The majority of his material comes from the interior of the state (*biribas*, *cabaças*, etc).

When we spoke with Mr. Odmário about the subject, he revealed that he pays other people to make the berimbaus for him and that he himself knows very little about the instrument or the process of making it. For him, it is just a question of business. The only important thing that he told me is that the *biriba* that he uses must be soaked in water for days in order to be able to strip off the bark.

As we explained, *biriba* bark comes off easily by knife or by hand, but because of this confusion, we went back and asked various mestres to clarify the point. None of them had ever heard of soaking the *biriba* in water. The conclusion is that Odimário was trying to impress a tourist with the great amount of work (and thus the high price) of making a berimbau, or that he uses another wood that is not *biriba*, or that he just does not know.

Odimário's berimbaus are also sold in the cities of São Gonçalo, Muritiba, and Feira de Santana. Most of the other berimbaus sold in the Mercado Modelo are produced in small quantities, built and sold by the same individual as a private business.

## Other manufacturers

Outside the Mercado Modelo, there are other people who make berimbaus and sell them in the Terreiro de Jesus and similar places. One of them explained some of the problems that small-scale manufacturers face. While the large manufacturers buy their *biribas* and *cabaças* in bulk in the interior, the smaller ones have to buy *biriba* at the lumberyards and the *cabaças* at the São Joaquim Market, where it is more expensive. In the winter of 1976, a drought in the northeast of the country reduced the harvest of *cabaças* (among other crops), and the prices consequently increased. This year in São Joaquim the prices ranged from 30-60 *cruzeiros* per *cabaça* depending on its size. In the interior, each *cabaça* cost 6-7 *cruzeiros*.

Our informant told us that he could make a berimbau for 20-25 *cruzeiros*. He sold berimbaus with a large *cabaça* for 50-70 *cruzeiros* and those with a small *cabaça* for 30-40 *cruzeiros*.

He and others like him also sell berimbaus at souvenir shops in bus stations in Bahia. The price of berimbaus in general depends on the prices of the *biriba* (which is harder and harder to find each year) and *cabaças*.

## The technique of playing

When learning, the first thing the student studies is how to balance the berimbau. This is done through exercises, moving the instrument up and down and from side to side. It takes time to strengthen the muscles in the left hand, since the full weight of the instrument rests on the pinky finger, and this is quite painful in the beginning. In fact, one mestre told us that the great majority of Capoeira students never learn to play berimbau because of the discomfort of this position.

It also takes lots of practice to hold the *vareta* correctly. One exercise involves holding it while the right arm hangs relaxed beside the body, with the *vareta* following the vertical line of the arm. Then the arm is lifted to the position for playing, and the *vareta* automatically assumes the correct position. It must be held as loosely as possible, because the slightest tension will lessen the sonorousness of the sound produced.

When the student manages to hold the *vareta* loosely enough and produce a sound of some quality, he begins to learn parts of toques, little by little putting the pieces together until he can play the whole toque. During this time, he learns to control the coin, slowly learning the various nuances of possible sounds: when the coin is pressed against the arame, when it is removed, and other subtleties necessary for the different toques.

The *caxixi* makes sound with each hit of the *vareta*, but one must also learn to use it alone, shaking it forward in between the hits.

The great variety of sound that the berimbau is capable of producing comes as a surprise to a person who is unfamiliar with the instrument. Many years of daily practice are needed in order to play it well. One illustration of this: Mestre Canjiquinha has two sons who also do Capoeira and who play the majority of the instruments. One of them, who was 12 years old at the time and who had played berimbau for a few years, demonstrated some toques for us. After he finished Canjiquinha said, "Five years from now, he'll know how to play."

In conclusion, there is nothing truer than Canjiquinha's words: "Playing berimbau is very difficult. Hitting the berimbau, well, everyone hits. But really playing it is very difficult." Through total dedication to the perfection of the art, he is among the few who really know how to play.

## **The association of the berimbau with capoeira**

The book *Capoeira Angola* by Rego is one of the most complete sources about the historical trajectory of capoeira, so we will not repeat everything here. The first evidence that we have of the practice of capoeira comes from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But it is not known whether or not capoeira was played with the berimbau.

All of the engravings we have from that century show capoeira being played without the berimbau. In the engraving that definitely shows capoeira, it is accompanied by a drum (Photo 3). In other engravings that show a dance or activity similar to capoeira, it is done with an instrument that looks like a musical bow, or without any instrument at all (Photos 4 and 5). In the engravings that show the berimbau, the instrument is used only in association with selling things or with asking for handouts.

Our theory is that the association of the game with the instrument occurred late, perhaps only at the end of the nineteenth century.

Also, outside of Bahia it appears that the use of the berimbau disappeared completely. Its use for attracting potential customers or for begging no longer exists. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of the mestres and capoeiristas in Recife, Salvador, and Rio were from Bahia.

So we would like to propose a rather radical idea that could perhaps be proved false with more research: that capoeira and the berimbau were never used together in any part of Brazil outside Bahia. We would like to add that:

1. In the places where capoeira was not associated with any musical instrument, capoeira became extinct after the era of conflicts between capoeiristas and police ended;
2. In these same places, all uses of the berimbau ended;

3. The only place where the two became linked was Bahia;
4. Because of this association the two survived, with the rhythm and music of the instrument ensuring continuation of capoeira, and capoeira saving the berimbau from extinction;
5. The game was reintroduced into Rio by Bahians – this time associated with the berimbau.

## Places of meeting for the capoeiristas

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the capoeiristas of Salvador gathered in various places. Usually, these places were close to a bar or boutique with a wide street in front that had room to play capoeira. In their free time on holidays and Sundays, the capoeiristas gathered to chat, drink, and play Capoeira. Many of today's mestres began learning in this environment. Mestre Caiçara said that one of the main points was by the Ladeira de Pedra in the Largo do Tanque area. Mestre Canjiquinha said that he learned with Aberrê, each Sunday in a different place, because capoeira was illegal back then. He says that one of the main points was in the Brotas neighborhood, in the Baixa da Pequena Saldanha, in the Banheira do Finado. Rego says that some of the “greatest concentrations were on the Estrada da Liberdade, Pau Miúdo, Cidade de Palha, Rua dos Capitães, Rua do Passo Taboão, Cais Dourado, and at the Cais do Porto.” (Rego, 1968: 36)

After the academies began to gain popularity, these places stopped being frequented. Manuel Querino (in *The African Race*, p. 657) wrote about the points where porters would wait for work: “The Africans, after they were freed, had no professional skills and, not wanting to deliver themselves to the work of agriculture which they had just left, they became day laborers. They would gather at various places in the city and wait to be hired to carry objects: chairs, barrels, pianos, etc. These points were called ‘corners’ and this is why it was common to hear: ‘Go over there and call a worker from the corner.’”

The rest of the chapter describes the habits of these laborers while they were not working. They made various types of objects (like hats and other things made out of straw). Rego writes that some of these laborers were great capoeiristas, but unfortunately he does not give the source of his information. In Bahia, each of these ‘corners’ had a chief called the ‘captain.’ In Recife, the groups were called ‘companies’ and the chiefs ‘governors.’

## The academies

The mestre-student relationship had been well-established since the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, there was no formal structure. The capoeiristas picked their students by chance, some picking a boy who was weaker than the others and was always being beaten up, others picking those who possessed some characteristic that attracted their attention. The lessons generally took place on weekends at the gathering places of the capoeiristas. In those days, the capoeiristas received the title of “mestre” from their students.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mestre Bimba, combining capoeira angola with techniques from other martial arts (free-fighting, jiu-jitsu, etc), established what he called capoeira regional. Its main differences from capoeira angola were the teaching sequences and series of throws. Bimba also established a teaching method with fourteen phases of learning.

In 1932, he opened the first capoeira academy in Bahia (and, presumably, in Brazil) where he taught capoeira regional. Soon afterwards, other academies began to open, and the present system was quickly established. Nowadays, the students pay a monthly fee, have scheduled hours, and follow a planned program. In the academy, the mestre has absolute authority.

Today we find the academies in a state of great flux. At the beginning, they taught only capoeira. When capoeira shows proved to be lucrative, the ever-growing tendency was to add more attractions, and *maculelê*, *puxada de rede*, *samba de roda*, and dances of *candomblé* were included.

Nowadays it would be impossible for academies to survive only by teaching capoeira. All the mestres we know have entered into the much more lucrative business of shows. The competition for contracts is intense. The programs become more elaborate each year, including props, special lighting effects, and scenes from colonial times. In the race to produce a show that is better than or different from those of the competitors, shocking innovations are appearing: women dancing *maculelê* (a dance traditionally for men, since it is very aggressive and requires much physical strength); berimbau duets with one instrument being three meters long and the other just half a meter; inclusion of new songs under the title of “folklore.”

That is enough to give an idea. Bahian folklore finds itself drowning in “tourism,” and the little that remains has already taken a stylized form. The result of this is that the list of activities and academies found in books like Rego’s, or in tourist publications, quickly lose validity.

For example: according to Rego’s book, published in 1968, Mestre Pastinha had an academy in the Pelourinho; Mestre Bimba’s was in the neighborhood of Brotas; Mestre Caiçara’s and Mestre Waldemar’s were in Liberdade. When we sought these academies for the first time in 1973, we were told that Mestre Pastinha’s had been closed, Mestre Bimba had passed away and an his ex-student Mestre Eziquiel was running an academy with Bimba’s name near the Terreiro de Jesus; Mestre Caiçara put on a show in the Folkloric Center and said that he had an academy near Campo Grande, but it was closed for the holidays; Mestre Canjiquinha put on a show in the Ondina theater; Mestre Waldemar only gave paid exhibitions.

By the end of 1976, Mestre Eziquiel could not be found; Mestre Bimba’s academy was run by Mestre Vermelho; Mestre Canjiquinha no longer had a show or an academy, and one of his ex-students gave a show in his place at the Ondina theater.

## The Mestres

There are now many mestres of capoeira all over the country. Some of them are very well known or were students of famous capoeiristas. In Salvador there are many good mestres, and Rego’s book can be consulted for a detailed description. Here, we will mention only those who participated directly or indirectly in our research.

1. Mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado) was born in Salvador on November 23, 1900 in the neighborhood of Brotas. He learned capoeira with an African called Bentinho, the captain of the Bahian Navigation Company (Rego, 1968: 268). He opened the first capoeira academy in Bahia in 1932. He invented capoeira regional. He recorded a disc entitled *Curso de Capoeira Regional Mestre Bimba*, with the Bahian recording company J.S. Discos, which we used in our study of the toques. He died in 1973.
2. Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha) was born on April 5, 1889 in Salvador and began learning capoeira at eight years old with Benedito, an old African. Every day he was sent to buy bread, and every day a bully intercepted him on the way and beat him up. Benedito watched these fights from the window of his house. One day, he called Pastinha and asked him if he wanted to learn how to beat the bully. So Pastinha trained every day in Benedito’s house. Finally one day Benedito said he was ready: he should pass the bully in the street, but wait for him to start the fight. When Pastinha walked by, the bully said: “You haven’t been around. Were you scared?” Pastinha replied, “Yes, I was.” The bully started the fight – and lost. Pastinha studied with Benedito for two years.

When he was thirteen he entered Naval School, where he spent ten years learning “all the marine arts.” In 1941 he opened his academy “Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola” on the Largo do Pelourinho, #19. In 1964 he published a book about capoeira, titled *Capoeira Angola*. In 1966 he traveled to Africa, invited by Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Relations as part of the Brazilian delegation to the First International Festival of Black Arts, in Dakar. According to Jorge Amado, he had already begun to lose his sight in 1962. Rego (1968: 252) says that by 1968 he could no longer play, but his academy was still open, although in a deteriorated state. When we met him in 1973, he was blind but in no way less lively than in the descriptions of Jorge Amado. He explained to us that the city of Salvador took the building where he had his academy in order to renovate it, and that he was living with a pension of approximately 700 *cruzeiros* per month. Jorge Amado says, “For me, Pastinha is one of the great figures of Bahian popular life.” We have to agree. The city of Salvador should honor this simple man with a fertile imagination and an agile and active mind, who is so representative of Bahia’s culture and history.

3. Mestre Waldemar (Waldemar da Paixão) was born in Salvador on February 22, 1916. He is one of the most famous capoeiristas in Bahia. He says that he began studying capoeira in 1936 and teaching Capoeira in 1940. He saw the problems with the police at the time of Pedrito (Pedro de Azevedo Gordilho), the leader of the famous Cavalry Squadron that heavily persecuted capoeiristas and *candomblés* – but Waldemar says he was never involved. He began the commercialization of the berimbau in Bahia, and he is very well known for his vast repertoire of songs. For several years, he and his students have held demonstrations every Sunday on a street in the neighborhood of Liberdade. Nowadays he spends almost all his time making berimbaus.
  
4. Mestre Canjiquinha (Washington Bruno da Silva) was born on September 25, 1925. He was a student of the famous capoeirista Aberrê, beginning capoeira when he was 11, in the days when capoeira was still illegal. He learned to play berimbau and sing with Zeca do Urugai. In 1954 the director of tourism invited Popó from Santo Amaro to give a *maculelê* demonstration in Salvador. Canjiquinha learned how to dance *maculelê* with him, in that year. He learned *puxada de rede* when he was a boy. There was a man called Pele who sold fish in his free time. He always took Canjiquinha with him on his donkey to the place known as “Carimbambo Chega Nega” on the beach, where Canjiquinha participated in *puxada de rede* and learned all the songs associated with it. He also learned *samba de roda* as a boy, since his mother and sister always participated in the dance. His repertoire of songs is probably greater than any other capoeirista, and he has written many himself. He is very good at improvising. He is also an excellent showman and possesses an almost instinctive knowledge of what the audience likes. Perhaps this is why he has been the capoeirista most frequently invited to perform in official state exhibitions, in clubs, and in theaters. He is extremely dedicated to the art, which he serves with integrity, demanding perfection of himself and of his students. He has never presented capoeira in a public square because he says that this “devalues my sport.” For many years Canjiquinha had a show in the Ondina theater, near the Zoological Park in Salvador. Two years ago he lost the spot to the competition of an ex-student. He then began to build his own academy alongside his house in the Cosme de Farias neighborhood. He ran out of money and could not complete it; the only thing missing was the ceiling. He wrote to the Secretary of Education of the State inquiring about possibilities for assistance, but six months have gone by without any response or confirmation of the reception of his letter. Currently he works as a mimeograph machine operator in the city hall.
  
5. Mestre Caiçara (Antônio Conceição Morais), born in 1930. He says that he began to learn capoeira with Aberrê when he was 14 years old. He spoke about the capoeiristas’ conflicts with the police, in which he participated when he was young. He had the only academy that participated in demonstrations in public squares, saying, “It is a pleasure to

leave my group and put myself in the middle of the people.” He has given shows every year on December 4<sup>th</sup> in the Baixa dos Sapateiros, December 8<sup>th</sup> in Conceição; December 13<sup>th</sup> in Santa Luzia; January 1<sup>st</sup> in Boa Viagem; January 6<sup>th</sup> in Capinha, and he closes the year “on Bonfim Sunday” in front of the Bonfim Church. For a long time he performed a show in the Folkloric Center, but we do not know if he is still there today.

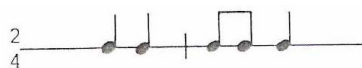
6. Mestre Eziquiel was born in Salvador in 1945 and was a student of Mestre Bimba. For several years he took care of the capoeira regional academy that Vermelho bought from Mestre Bimba, when Bimba left Salvador. At the end of 1976, he was no longer in this place and it was believed that he had organized his own show.

Other berimbau players who participated in this research include two boys, members of a folkloric show, one an artisan, the other an engineer; and Mestre Barbeirinho, whose academy is in the neighborhood of Itapoã and who recorded a tape of various toques for us.

## The Toques

A toque is a rhythmic pattern when played on the *atabaque* in *candomblé*, and a rhythmic-melodic pattern when played on the berimbau (since this instrument has two notes).

For example, the rhythm:



Played repeatedly would be a rhythmic pattern.

Whereas if we play repeatedly using two notes, it would be a rhythmic-melodic pattern:



Among the berimbau toques, there are some that are old, with unknown history; one that was created during the time of persecution by Pedrito and the Cavalry; and some that are modern, with known composers.

The old ones, or at least those with unknown composers, are:

- São Bento Grande
- São Bento Pequeno
- Angola
- Angolina
- Santa Maria
- Ave Maria
- Amazonas
- Banguela
- Samba da Capoeira
- Jogo de Dentro
- Aviso

The toque developed in the time of Pedrito and used as a warning for the arrival of the Cavalry is called “Cavalaria” and imitates the sound of horses’ hooves.

The modern toques are:

- Iuna – by Mestre Bimba

- Muzenza – by Mestre Canjiquinha

Other toques whose authors we do not know include:

- Saimongo
- Gege

Here we will reproduce the list of toques used by various mestres that Rego collected in 1968:

**Mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado)**

- São Bento Grande
- Benguela
- Cavalaria
- Santa Maria
- Luna
- Idalina
- Amazonas

**Canjiquinha (Washington Bruno da Silva)**

- Angola
- Angolinha
- São Bento Grande
- São Bento Pequeno
- Santa Maria
- Ave Maria
- Samongo
- Cavalaria
- Amazonas
- Angola em gege
- São Bento Grande em gege
- Muzenza
- Jogo de Dentro
- Aviso

**Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha)**

- São Bento Grande
- São Bento Pequeno
- Angola
- Santa Maria
- Cavalaria
- Amazonas
- Luna

**Gato (José Gabriel Góis)**

- Angola
- São Bento Grande
- Jogo de Dentro
- São Bento Pequeno
- São Bento Grande de Compasso
- São Bento de Dentro
- Angolinha.
- Luna
- Cavalaria
- Benguela

- Santa Maria
- Santa Maria Dobrado
- Samba de Angola
- Ijexá
- Panhe a laranja no chão tico-tico
- Samongo
- Benguela Sustenida
- Assalva (or Hino)

#### **Waldemar (Waldemar da Paixão)**

- São Bento Grande
- São Bento Pequeno
- Benguela
- Ave Maria
- Santa Maria
- Cavalaria
- Samongo
- Angolinha
- Gege
- Estandarte
- Luna

#### **Bigodinho (Francisco de Assis)**

- São Bento Grande
- Cinco Salomão
- Cavalaria
- Jogo de Dentro
- Angola
- Angolinha
- Santa Maria
- Panhe a laranja no chão tico-tico

#### **Arnol (Arnol Conceição)**

- São Bento
- Angola
- Jogo de Dentro
- Angolinha
- Samba de Capoeira

#### **Traíra (João Ramos do Nascimento)**

- Santa Maria
- São Bento Pequeno
- São Bento Grande
- Angolinha
- Cavalaria
- Jogo de Dentro
- Angola Dobrada
- Angola
- Angola Pequena
- Santa Maria Regional
- Luna
- Gege-Ketu

One probable indication of the age of the toque is the age of the capoeirista who uses it. The toques that appear only once on the list are probably composed by the capoeirista who plays it. Generally, toques with the addition of “em gege”, “repicado”, “dobrado” or another variation of the simple name consist of variations of that toque.

This list gives the impression that everything is clear and simple – that is, until we start to study the subject more deeply. The list above was made from information given to Rego by the mestres. During our research, various mestres could not play the toques that they had told Rego were part of their repertoire. One who was having a particularly difficult time finally asked us where we had gotten our list of his toques. When we told him, he said (remembering that it was he who had provided the information) that he used to know them all but had forgotten.

This may have been the truth, since this mestre had not been active for years. Some mestres said that the lists given by others were exaggerated and that they could not play all the toques they claimed they could. One mestre played the toque “Jogo de Dentro” for us. In another year, when we spoke with him in order to clarify some points, he said that “Jogo de Dentro” is not a toque.

Yet another problem is that often the same toque receives different names, or toques with the same name are played completely differently. Here we will record the names and toques of some of the mestres and berimbau players in Bahia, in an attempt to clarify the situation.

## Notation

Because of the various effects produced by the berimbau, we had to develop a system of notation to reproduce the toques. We will use the following symbols:

High note – Played with the coin pressing against the *arame*:



Low note – Played with the *arame* free:



*Caxixi* playing alone:



Buzz tone, in which the coin rests lightly against the *arame*:



Coin pressing against the *arame* producing a higher note, but without a hit from the *vareta*:



Movement of the *cabaça* from a position against the belly to a position farther out, producing the “wah-wah” effect:



Open – Played with the *cabaça* far from the belly:

**A**

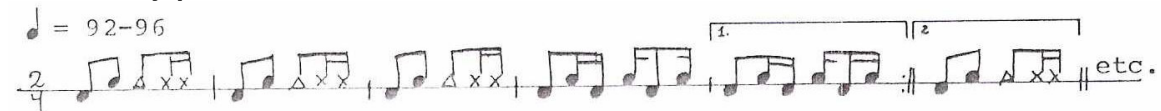
Closed – Played with the *cabaça* against the belly:

**F**

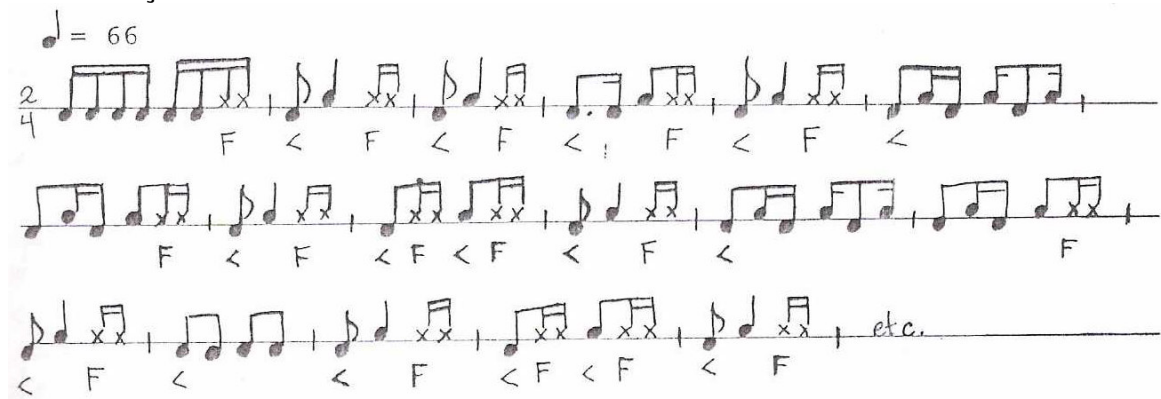
Generally, when the low note is played, the *cabaça* is closer to the belly; and when the high note is played, the *cabaça* is held at a slightly greater distance. Also, when the low note is played, the *arame* is always hit below the coin; and when the high note is played, the *arame* is always hit above the coin.

## Angola

### Mestre Canjiquinha:



### Mestre Caiçara:

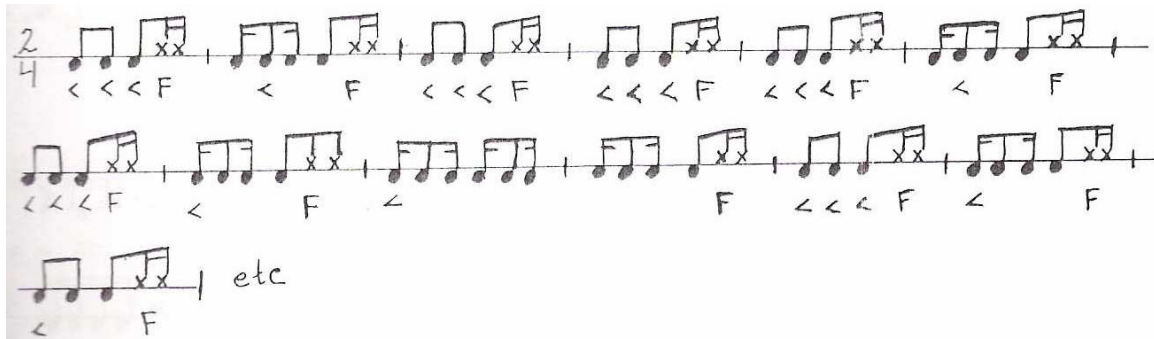


**Mestre Barbeirinho:** Played a toque similar to Mestre Canjiquinha's “Santa Maria with the sound of Angola” (see Santa Maria)

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## Angolina

Mestre Waldemar:

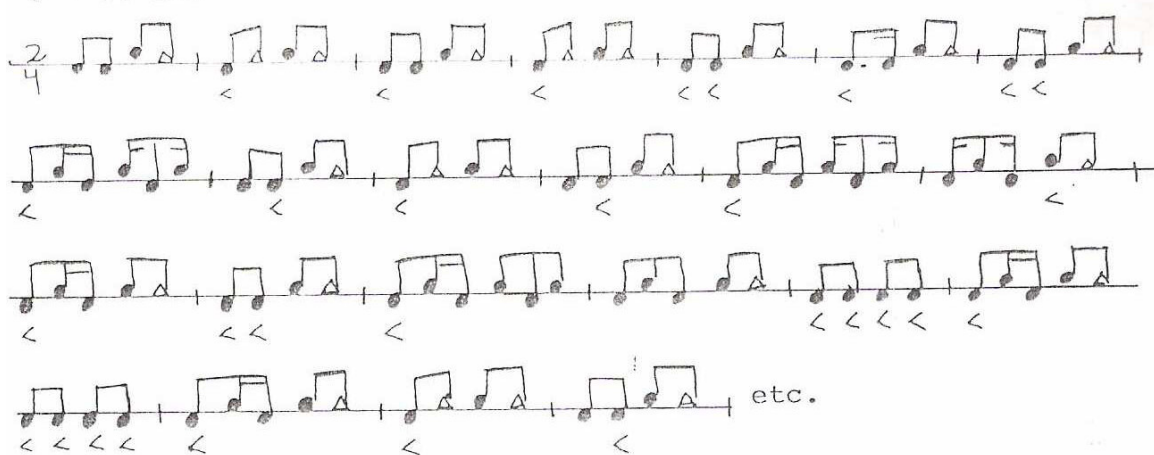


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## São Bento Grande

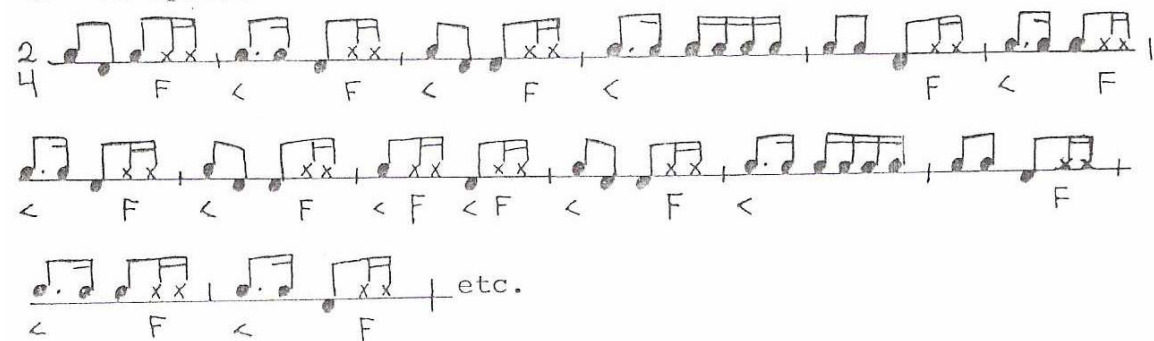
Mestre Bimba:

♩ = 96-104



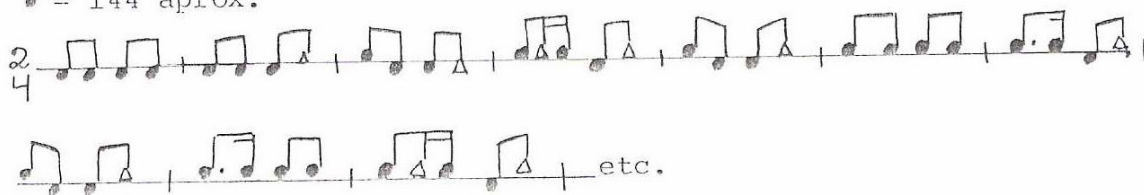
Mestre Waldemar:

♩ = 72 aprox.



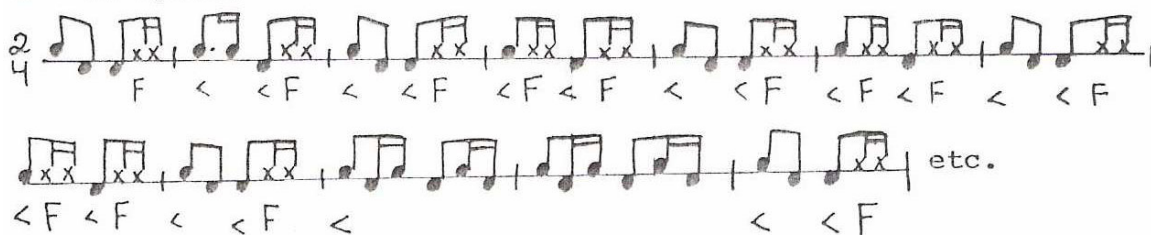
### Mestre Canjiquinha:

♩ = 144 aprox.

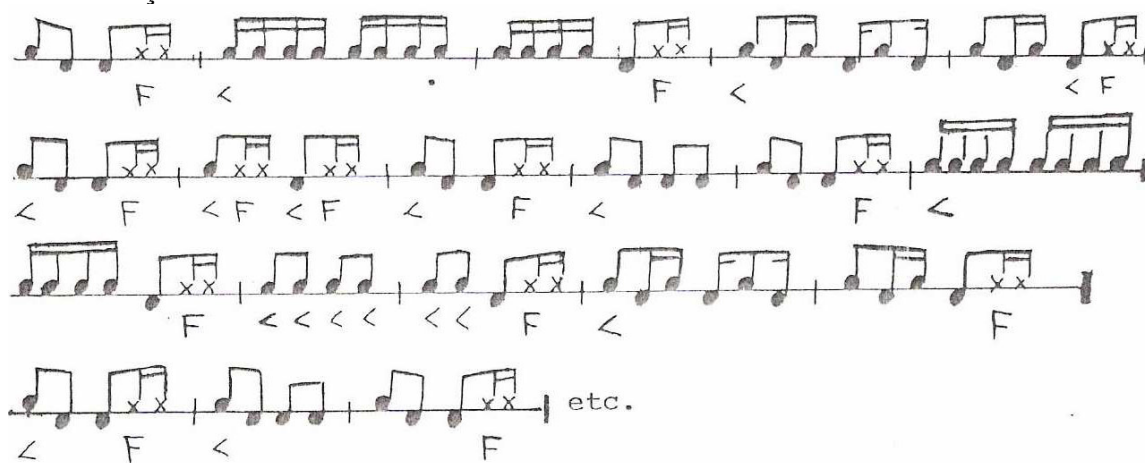


### Boy from the "show":

♩ = 80 aprox.

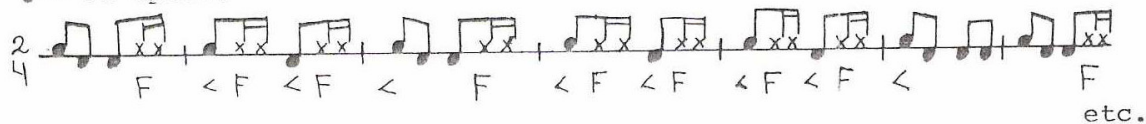


### Mestre Caiçara:



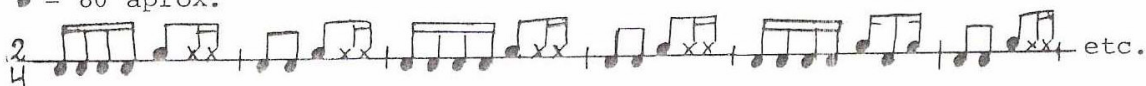
### Mestre Barbeirinho:

♩ = 92 aprox.

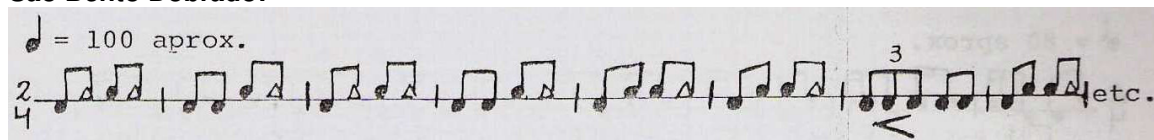


### São Bento Repicado:

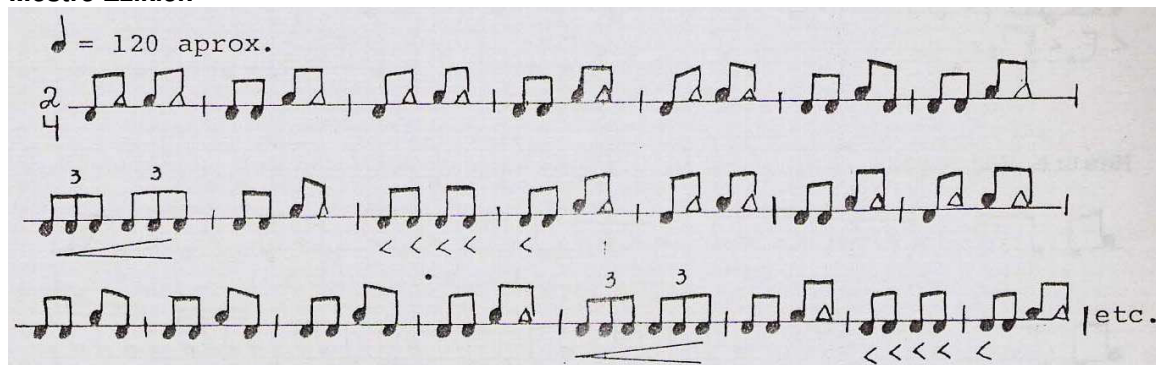
♩ = 80 aprox.



### São Bento Dobrado:

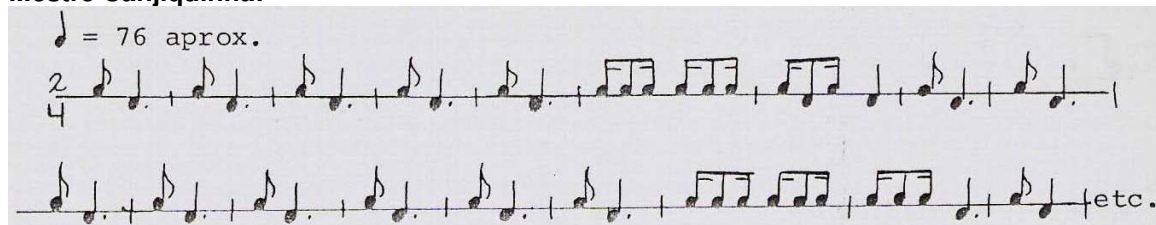


### Mestre Ezikel:

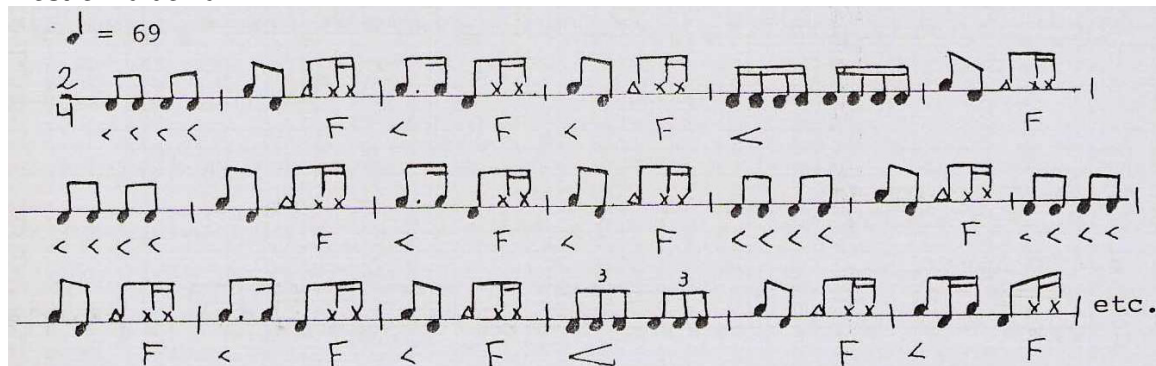


### São Bento Pequeno

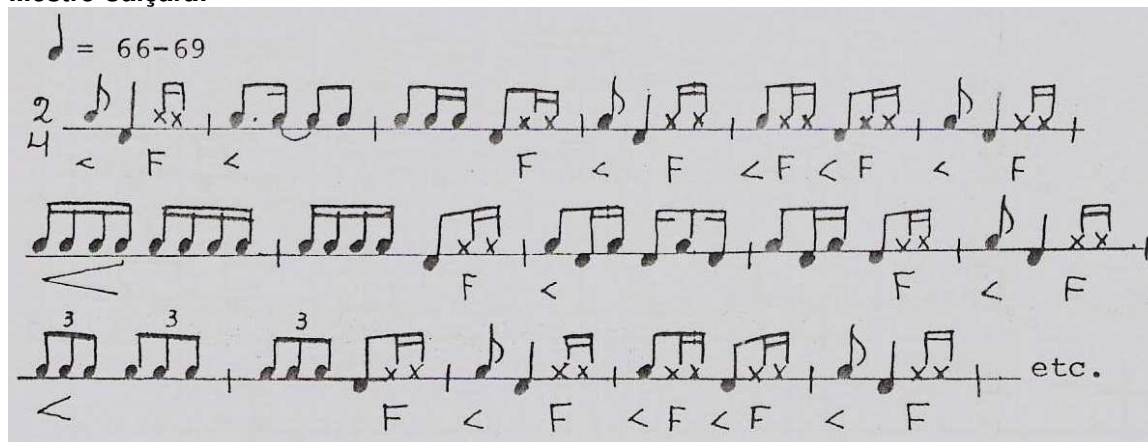
#### Mestre Canjiquinha:



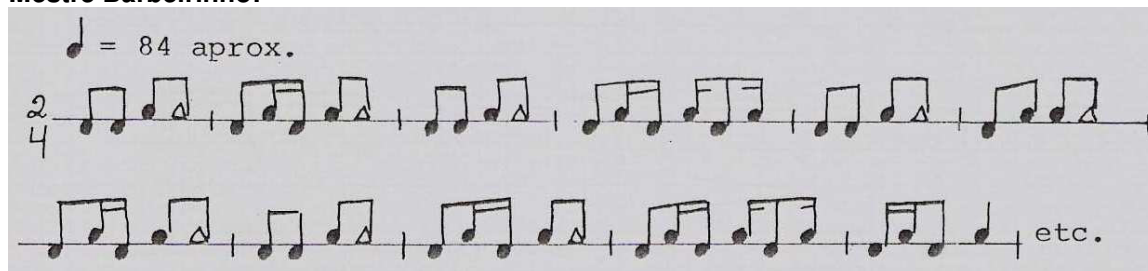
#### Mestre Waldemar:



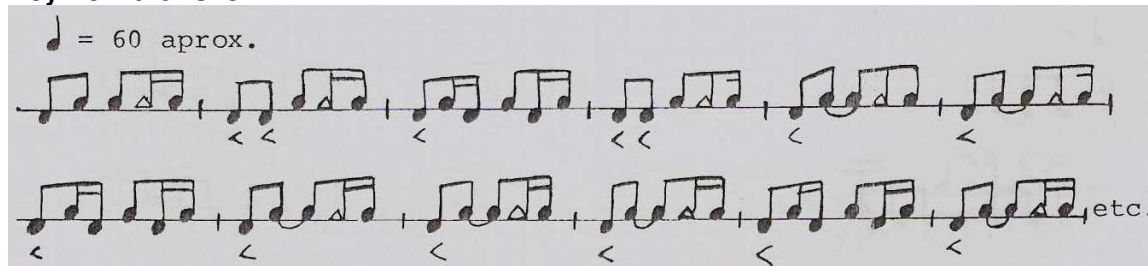
**Mestre Caiçara:**



**Mestre Barbeirinho:**



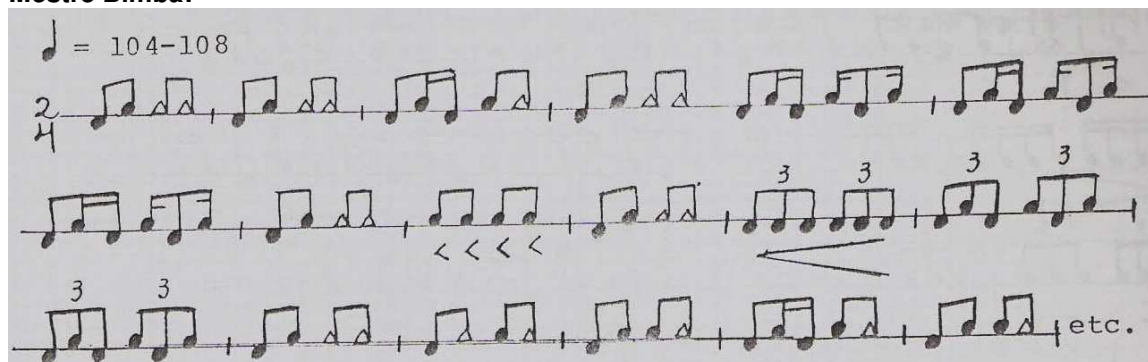
**Boy from the "show":**



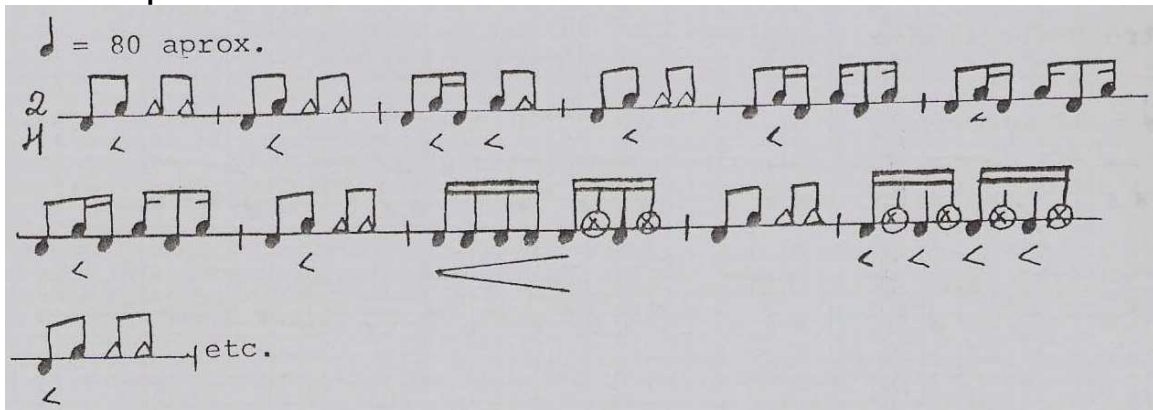
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**Banguela**

**Mestre Bimba:**

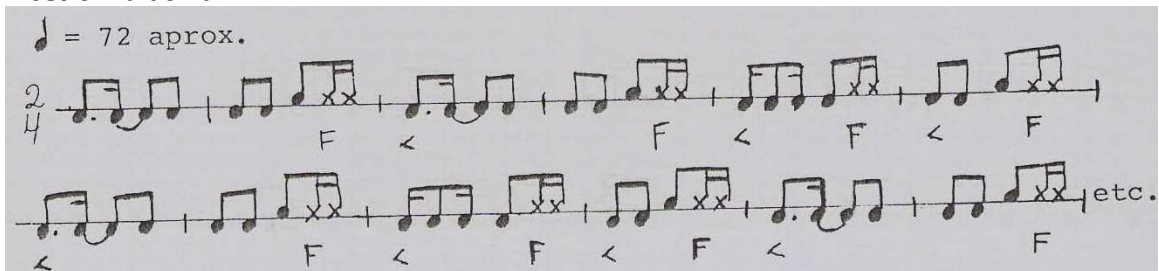


**Mestre Eziquiel:**

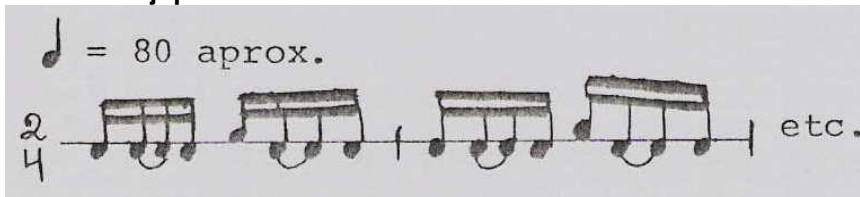


**Mestre Barbeirinho:** Played the toque with the name “Slow Amazonas”

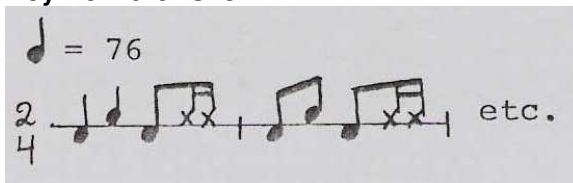
**Mestre Waldemar:**



### Mestre Canjiquinha:

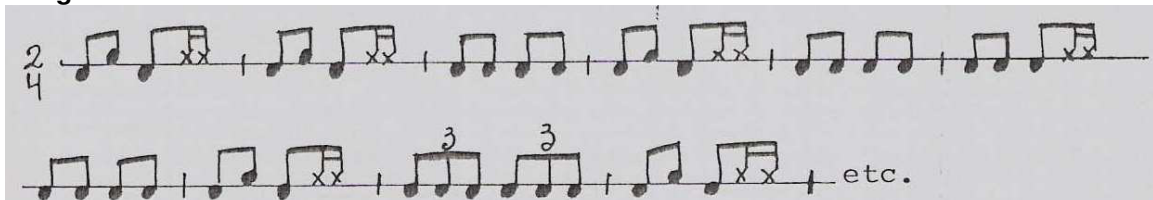


### Boy from the “show”:



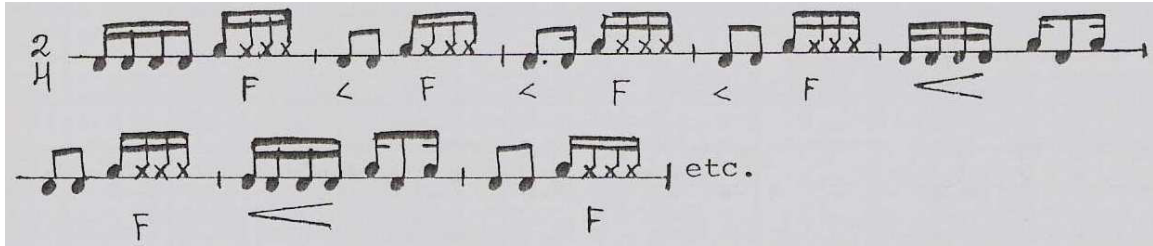
Played the same as Canjiquinha's "Santa Maria."

**Banguela dobrado:**



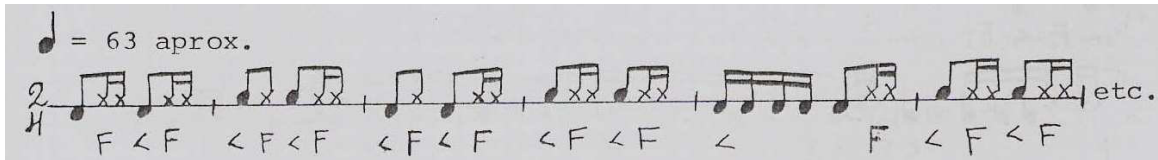
## Amazonas

### Mestre Bimba:



### Mestre Ezikiel: Same as Bimba

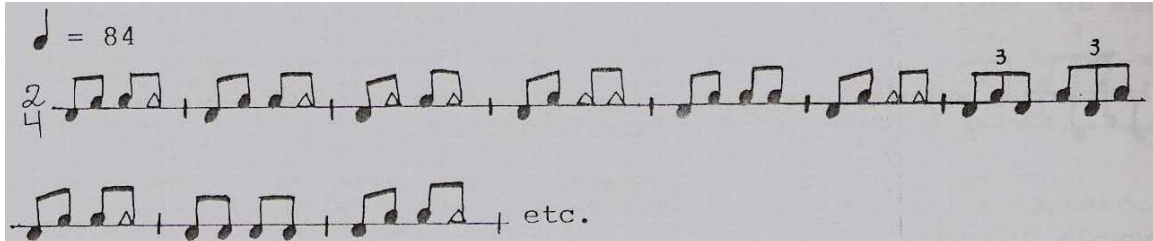
### Mestre Barbeirinho:



### Amazonas Lento: $\text{♩} = 63$ Played same as Bimba's "Banguela"

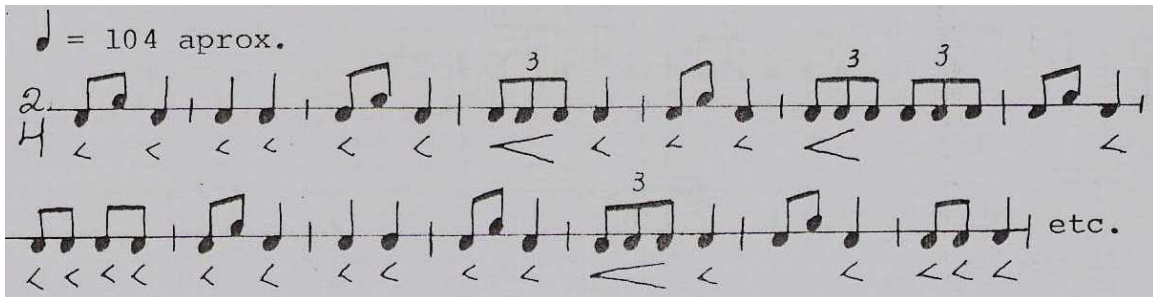
### Amazonas Repicado: $\text{♩} = 84$ Same as "Amazonas Lento" but faster

### Amazonas with the sound of São Bento:

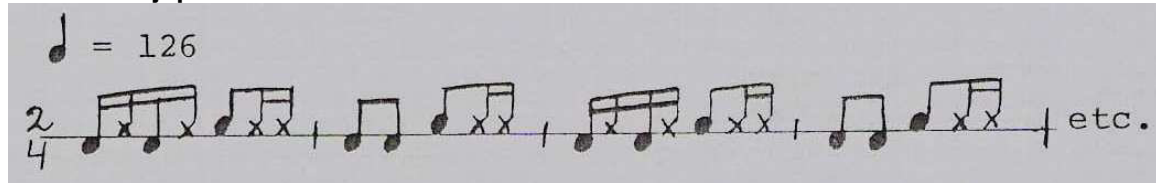


## Cavalaria

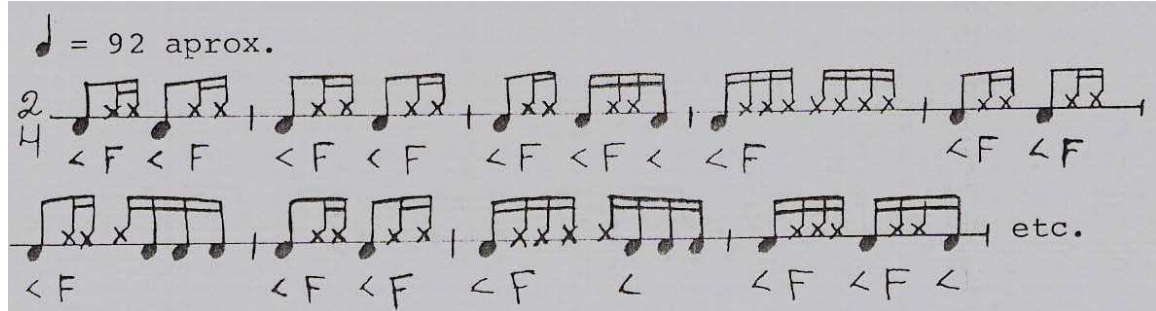
### Mestre Bimba:



**Mestre Canjiquinha:**



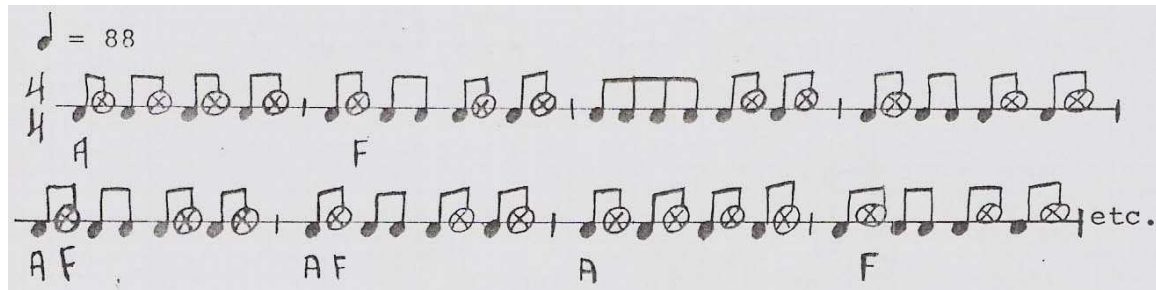
**Mestre Barbeirinho:**



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**luna**

**Mestre Bimba:**

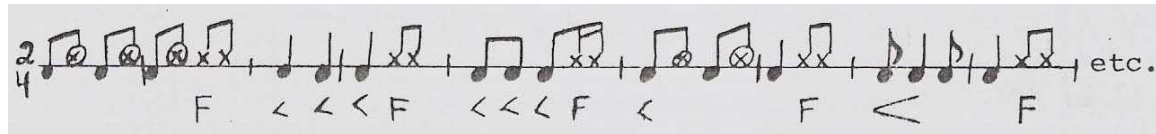


**Mestre Ezikiel:** Same as Bimba

**Boy from the "show":** Played the first four measures of Bimba's toque

**Mestre Barbeirinho:** Same as Bimba

**Mestre Waldemar:**



## Santa Maria

**Mestre Waldemar:**

$\text{♩} = 138$  \* Moeda sô, sem bater com vareta

etc.

**Mestre Caiçara:**

$\text{♩} = 84$  Executado igual ao "Ponhe a laranja no chão Tico-Tico".

etc.

**Mestre Barbeirinho:**

$\text{♩} = 88$

etc.

**Santa Maria with the sound of Angola:** Same as Canjiquinha's "Angola"

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## Samba de Angola

**Mestre Canjiquinha:**

$\text{♩} = 96$

etc.

**Mestre Caiçara:**

$\text{♩} = 104$

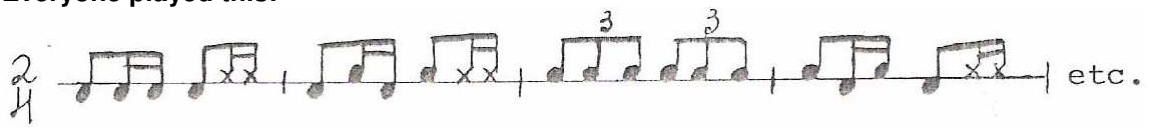
etc.

**Boy from the "show":** Tried to play this, but was completely wrong

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## Ponhe a laranja no chão tico-tico

Everyone played this:



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## Muzenza

Mestre Canjiquinha:

