It is 9.40 p.m. on a hot June evening, in the English city of Cloisterham. The year is 2008. There are various activities in progress in the building of the students’ social club: rehearsals for a play, a meeting of the French Society, and several bars are open, with cricket and soccer games on their giant TV screens. The largest room in the building, where bands play gigs, and the dirty wooden floor smells of stale beer, is very, very hot, although every door is wedged open in defiance of the fire regulations. Most of the eighty or so people in the hall are seated on the floor in one of four circles (rodas), watching two capoeira players in the centre of their circle, clapping, and waiting to play in the roda themselves. Sounds of singing, drumming and an unusual stringed instrument can be heard seeping out of the room. It is the first evening of a four-day capoeira festival called a Batizado. This part of the event is due to end at 10.00 p.m., so people can adjourn to a local night club for a Samba and Forró Party due to start at 11.00 p.m. The capoeira teachers and students present have been training since 6.30 p.m. There are seven people seated on chairs in the centre of the hall, playing instruments, one of whom is singing the verses of songs in Brazilian Portuguese. Everyone else in the room sings the short choruses, making a call and response pattern. The man leading the singing, a tall Pole, has chosen a song with the chorus ‘Bahia axé, axé Bahia’.

At 9.45 p.m. there is a shuffle among the musicians in the band (bateria): some players hand over their instruments to other people. An African-Brazilian woman takes over the drum and begins to lead the singing, changing the song. The chorus, picked up quickly by Cloisterham students and more hesitantly by others because it is not one of the commonest songs: ‘Mora Yemanjá, Mora Yemanjá.’ A few capoeiristas ask their neighbour what
the words of the chorus are, and gradually try to join in. Soon at least fifty people of many nationalities and several races, and many religions or none, are singing praise to an African Brazilian orixá, a sea goddess, to enthuse the capoeira play.

Among the eighty people are two sociologists, a man in his early thirties with the capoeira name of Trovão (Thunder), and a woman in her sixties with the capoeira name of Bruxa (Witch). Trovão, in black street trousers and a faded t-shirt from the 2005 winter Batizado, is playing the agogó in the bateria. Bruxa is seated in a roda made up mainly of Contra-Mestre Achilles’s students from Tolnbridge, where he teaches twice a week. She is clapping and singing out of tune wearing black linen cut offs and a t-shirt that says, in Portuguese, “I love capoeira.”

The two authors of this chapter are Trovão and Bruxa, and that session of the festival is typical of our ethnographic fieldwork on diasporic capoeira. Such scenes are played out all over the UK on many weekends of the year. We opened the chapter with an extract from our ethnographic fieldwork to show how there can be apparent overlaps between the Brazilian dance and martial art capoeira, and the African-Brazilian religion Candomblé. However our central argument is that the vibrant, and geographically widespread, culture of capoeira in the UK uses the term axé as a central concept although it does not embed capoeira in Candomblé belief or practice, but rather creates its own embodied and performative meaning of the term. In the capoeira classes that are the focus of our research, axé is characterised as good energy, which produces good capoeira play and is, in its turn, generated by the singing, the clapping, the instrumental music and the physical capoeira, such as we have described from the 2008 summer festival in Cloisterham.

The chapter begins with a brief account of capoeira itself, explores the landscape of capoeira in the UK, outlines our research, and the habitus of diasporic capoeira regional in the UK, and then focuses on the concept of axé in that capoeira habitus. To heighten the paradox, we chose, as our title, the chorus line of a capoeira song that does have a clear link to Candomblé because it greets an orixá, the Sea Goddess (Robben 1989), although it is only occasionally sung in the UK; usually when women are leading the

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4 We both have real capoeira nicknames given to us by Achilles, but use pseudonymous ones, Trovão (Thunder) and Bruxa (Witch), to help protect the confidentiality of our informants.