

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: MK Asante

Mama Kariamu Welsh: Memorial Tribute

by **L. Graciella Maiolatesi**

“When I’m in the studio, I feel empowered. When I’m in the studio, I’m creating my world.”

-Mama Kariamu Welsh (Maiolatesi 2014).

[Kariamu Welsh](#). “Kariamu,” which means “one who reflects the moon” in Kiswahili.

She held many names: Aunt Kari, Nna, Amai, Dr. Kariamu Welsh; to me she was Mama K.

Say Her Name

Mama Kariamu Welsh, age 72, transitioned to ancestor in the early morning of Tuesday, October 12th, 2021 at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She was a mother, grandmother, aunt, daughter, teacher, friend, mentor, role model, activist, choreographer, scholar, and more. She was kindness embodied. She belonged deeply to herself, and yet, most people would describe her as “the most generous person” they knew. Mama Kariamu understood what it was to be poured into by loving family and mentors, how someone’s belief in you could help shape you to be your most authentic, most liberated self. Whether she’d known you for a lifetime or had just met you, Mama Kariamu charged you with the conviction to show up and be present—rooted—in your purpose. “Walk Strong!” was her reminder that with every step we carry our ancestors with us, that when we dance they come alive, and to doubt our worth would be to erase their memory and sacrifice.

Celebration of Life

“My biological parents birthed me, but Mama Kariamu birthed my dreams.”

-Dr. E. Gaynell Sherrod, Interim Executive Director of Philadanco, paying respect at Mama K’s service.

“All Rise!”

Hearing these words echo across the large church, we—an intergenerational group of primarily Black dancers, scholars, friends, colleagues, and mentees—rise from the plush red chairs that fill the [New Covenant Church of Philadelphia](#). A large family processional makes their way down the center aisle: left to honor Mama Kariamu are her mother, Ruth Hoover; siblings Sylvia Artis and William Hoover; sons Daahoud Jackson Asante and [MK Asante](#); grandchildren Nasir Hassan Allen-Asante, Fukai Asante, Aion Asante, Akira Asante, Nova Asante, Akila Asante; and dozens of nieces, nephews, and cousins.

It’s in this moment that her passing finally feels real: we are here to say goodbye to a monumental matriarch. [The service](#) is beautiful: dressed in all white, generations of dancers and musicians [Kariamu & Company: Traditions](#), perform a final tribute to Mama K. As they dance and sing, onlookers clap and ululations fill the room, overlapping each other like waves. Multiple family members and mentees share their memories; Dr. C. Kemal Nance, one of Mama Kariamu’s dance sons, acknowledges the immense honor but also weight of being the successor to her dance technique, Umfundalai. Her nephew requests that we join in for one final, standing ovation and collectively we send Mama Kariamu off to the next part of her spirit journey. Breathing in deeply, straightening my spine on the inhale and planting my feet to the ground, I allow my exhale to carve space for the weight of this moment: how do we say goodbye to a living lexicon?

JA! LI! TU! NE!: We Begin Here

“I can remember going from ‘colored’ to ‘negro’ to ‘African-American’ to ‘Black.’”

-Mama Kariamu Welsh (Maiolatesi 2014).

Born in Thomasville, North Carolina on September 22nd, 1949, Mama Kariamu was raised by her mother, Ruth Hoover. When she was young they relocated to Brooklyn, New York. Mama Kariamu went to college at SUNY Buffalo where she majored in English. Later, she would receive her doctorate from New York University. In 1970, she began developing a movement praxis now known as the Umfundalai technique.

Dancing Our Africa: Umfundalai and An African Aesthetic

"My favorite Mama Kariamu quote has always been 'African dance lives wherever African people reside.' The quote reignites my love for African dance every time I think of it, and reminds me that African dance and the African Diaspora will always be a sacred part of me that can never be stripped away, or silenced, no matter where I may go."

-Sophiann Moore, BFA Temple University and member of Kariamu & Company: Traditions.

The 1970's were transformative for Mama Kariamu's career and passions. She studied dance with Baba Chuck Davis, Pearl Primus, and Pearl Reynolds, who would serve as both friend and mentor to Mama Kariamu as she developed the Umfundalai technique (Maiolatesi 2014). Between 1971 and 1973, Mama Kariamu co-founded The School of Movement at 11 E. Utica Street in Buffalo, NY. This is where the beginning phases of Umfundalai were explored, developed, and codified.

Umfundalai [Mm-Foon-dah-la] is Kiswahili for "essence" or "essential ." Within the *Iwé Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook*, Mama Kariamu wrote:

The Umfundalai dance technique is a Pan-African contemporary dance technique and was developed as a means to access and utilize movement traditions that exist in Africa and the Diaspora in order to stylize selected movements for neo-traditional and contemporary expression. As a Pan-African dance technique, the Umfundalai technique draws upon key movements from different ethnic groups, and many nations in Africa, along with the movements of black cultures in the United States, Caribbean, and South America. The technique is predicated on the premise that there are common aesthetic elements in African dances regardless of the region of the world that the movement comes from. Selected movements were isolated and organized and form the core of the Umfundalai dance technique. As a technique, Umfundalai strives to teach students the neo-traditional dances of Africa and the Diaspora as well as explore new approaches to contemporary choreography utilizing the vocabulary of the traditional dances... The Umfundalai technique continues to develop and is fluid and accommodating of new traditions and expressions. It is a codified dance technique that speaks to the African and Diasporan aesthetic, sensibilities, and sensitivities (Welsh & Nance 1).

*Umfundalai will live on, and with it Mama Kariamu's legacy. For more information on how to stay involved with the Umfundalai technique and community, please follow and support the [National Association of American African Dance Teachers](#) and their work with [Dancing Our Africa](#).

My Introduction to Mama K: Forever A Part of My Dance Lineage

While finishing my Sophomore year at Denison University in 2014, via the Summer Scholar Program, I conducted a movement research study titled, "Sankofa: Validating the Black Female (Dancing) Body." This research looked at how dance could be used as a tool of empowerment for Black female movement artists, and as part of my research I had the privilege of interviewing Bebe Miller, Dianne McIntyre, Suzan Bradford Kounta, and Kariamu Welsh. I was first introduced to Mama K through my mentor and her other dance son, Baba Stafford C. Berry Jr., and I am forever grateful to be held by this lineage. During her interview, Mama Kariamu shared with me that originally when creating Umfundalai she was intimidated by the term "technique," and questioned if she wanted Umfundalai to be known as such. She said that it was because of encouragement that she'd received from her mentor, Pearl Reynolds, that she developed Umfundalai as a technique. Looking back on this experience, Mama Kariamu identified what it was that made her hesitate: "[I] didn't want [the technique] to be about me! I wanted to create a practice that belonged to everybody. Umfundalai [intentionally] accepts you as you are."

The beautiful thing about Umfundalai is that it holds space for the vastness that is the African Diaspora. Within the *Iwé Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook*

, Mama Kariamu wrote:

My artistry draws from the calabash of African Diasporan movement and aesthetics. This deliberate choice empowers me to create new work that honors the traditions of those on whose shoulders I stand. Myth, legend, and literature are all resources for me as are the sounds of Black People, the rhythms of the urban landscape, and the cavernous echoes of the rural South. Nothing escapes my palette! Images of my mother singing in her bra and half-slip in the sticky humid August evenings in Brooklyn as she ironed, washed, and cleaned resonate with me not only as memory but also as movement-- as narrative. Jumping double dutch until it was so dark outside that I couldn't see the rope, gave me a polyrhythmic foundation that taught me how to enter and exit rhythm. Utterances, gesticulations, pauses, stillness, akimbo arms, and attitude all find their way to my work and me. I stylize selected movement vocabulary in order to re-conceptualize 'my Africa' (Welsh & Nance 1).

Kariamu Welsh, thINKingDANCE member

"Part of the problem with our perceptions of African dance is that there is no such thing as African dance. Africa is a continent with 57 countries and thousands of ethnic groups with even more dance traditions. Burundi drum and dance traditions reflect their aesthetic and history and should be given agency to be Burundi performers without the imposition of 'other' aesthetic traditions. The overarching category of African dance will one day hopefully fan out into distinct forms—Senegalese dance, Zimbabwean dance, Moroccan dance and many others—as audiences become more knowledgeable... My students represent the future and I want them to be informed dance advocates."

-Mama Kariamu's closing thoughts from her tD piece, "[The Royal Drummers and Dancers of Burundi: A Lesson On and Off the Stage](#)."

An inaugural writer for thINKingDANCE, Mama Kariamu contributed [12 articles](#) to tD during the first 2 years of the organization. Her tD bio humbly reads as:

"Kariamu Welsh is a Professor of dance in the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Welsh is the Artistic Director of Kariamu & Co.: Traditions. Kariamu is the recipient of numerous fellowships, grants and awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Choreography Fellowship, the Creative Public Service Award of NY, a 1997 Pew Fellowship, a 1997 Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a 1998 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, and three Senior Fulbright Scholar Awards. She is the founding Artistic Director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe in southern Africa. Dr. Welsh is the creator of the Umfundalai dance technique, a contemporary technique that has been in existence for forty years. Kariamu has written several books on African dance."

Here, I would like to note that the "several books" she wrote and edited broadened both the Dance and Black Studies field of thought, and our collective embodied understanding of African dance, as she emphasized the importance of the relationship between scholar and practitioner: *A Guide to African and African American Art (1980)*; *African Culture: Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies (1985)*; *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity (1989)*; *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions (1994)*; *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry (1997)*; *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices, an Aesthetic Analysis (2000)*; *Umfundalai: An African Dance Technique (2003)*; *African Dance- World of Dance (2010)*; *Iwe Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook (2017)*; *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities (2019)*.

In addition to this written lineage, she leaves behind the legacy of teacher and mentor to hundreds of students, myself included, during her time at NYU as professor in African-American Studies, and later at Temple University where she served as a full time dance professor, chairperson, and Professor Emerita of Temple University's Boyer College of Music and Dance.

Anecdotes From Mama K's "Sweethearts"

"Dare to be... Think of all of the women before you who have dared to be so that you could be."

-Mama Kariamua Welsh providing encouragement to L. Graciella Maiolatesi (Maiolatesi 2014).

"...Her presence, guidance and mentorship changed my life and my career in a way I cannot overstate and for which I will be eternally grateful. As I move forward, Kariamua is with me, and will live on in how I come to know and be with my students. Above all else, Kariamua was a person who saw the humanity in those around her, and cared about them. The fact that Kariamua cared about me, and believed in me, transformed my understanding of myself and the ways in which I have navigated the dance field. I feel honored and grateful for the opportunity to share this legacy, empowering dancers, and facilitating a process for them to understand and use their own power and agency to change themselves and thus the world."

-Dr. Laura Katz Rizzo, Temple University Professor.

"There are many moments with Mama Kariamua that have helped shape who I am and I am so internally grateful for them all. From the very beginning, she believed in my abilities before I even truly believed in myself fully. She invited me into the Umfundalai family, she gave me my first post-grad touring job opportunity, she invited me into her loving home, and so much more. She provided opportunities to teach in universities that I didn't believe I could do, but she saw the potential and helped me believe in myself in a whole new way. I stand more confidently in my Black dancing body because of her. She was a giver, nurturer, and loving. I am eternally grateful to be one of Mama Kariamua's sweethearts."

-Sophiann Moore, BFA Temple University & member of Kariamua & Company: Traditions.

Final Dobale

"The job of of a dancer is not to entertain their audience but to make them think, feel, and grow...with the idea of feeling empowered, an artist—whether Black or female, but especially if both—has to be accepting of not being recognized as 'normal' by society; when one can do this, then they have the freedom to 'dare to be.'"

- Mama Kariamua Welsh (Maiolatesi 2014).

Thank you for daring to be, Mama Kariamua. I am because you are. Forever included in my dobale.

*****And now, dear tD reader, I ask you to join me in giving Mama K a final dobale.*****

Place your right hand to your heart, then touch your right hand to the ground, thanking the Earth for holding us and ancestors for carrying us.

Bring your right hand back to heart, then, looking up towards the sky, extend your right arm above your head, right hand carving through space as we acknowledge the sky and universal blessings

Last time, bring your right hand to your heart and, leading with your right hand, make a soft arch from left to right in front of you until your hand is back on your heart. Thanking the here and now. This moment. This body. This heartbeat.

Fly high, sweet Sankofa Spirit. Asé.

Citation:

Ceremony of Life: Kariamu Welsh. "Program Notes." The Family of Kariamu Welsh. New Covenant Church of Philadelphia. 2021.

Maiolatesi, L. Graciella. "Interview With Mama Kariamu." *Sankofa: Validating The Black Female (Dancing) Body*. Denison University Summer Scholar Program: 2014.

Welsh, Kariamu. C. Kemal Nance. "Iwé Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook." The Organization of Umfundalai Teachers. 2018.

By L. Graciella Maiolatesi

November 12, 2021