Commentary

Umfundalai: Dr. Kariamu Welsh and the Afrocentric Essence of Unity

Alice Nicholas, Ph.D.
Alice.Nichola@csulb.edu
Africologist and Assistant Professor of Africana Studies
Department of Africana Studies
California State University, Long Beach

Abstract

Kariamu Welsh epitomizes the triple mission of Black Studies (cultural grounding, academic excellence and social responsibility). She inspires and influences theories and practice of centered and holistic African identity using American African dance as a pedagogical tool, a method of sharing both a message and a lesson on how to affirm and celebrate Blackness. Her Umfundalai technique continues to evolve, inspire and motivate dancers and those who watch with a knowing eye. This article celebrates Welsh and provides a brief overview of the significance of her contribution to African unity.

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> The job 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."
>
> ~Kariamu Welsh

Introduction

Umfundalai (pronounced "Mm Foon Dah Lah") is a Kiswahili term meaning "essence" or "essential." It is also the name of the dance technique[1] created by Kariamu Welsh, the pioneering choreographer, scholar, professor, writer, activist, and progenitor of American African[2] Dance and Studies. The American African Diaspora, as defined by Welsh, includes the U.S., Canada, Chile, the Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands (*Hot Feet* 1). This essay posits that Welsh epitomizes the triple mission of Black Studies (cultural grounding, academic excellence, and social responsibility).[3]

The Triple Mission of Black Studies

1. Cultural grounding – "requires ongoing critical dialog with African culture, constantly asking it questions and seeking from it answers, models and modalities of excellence and paradigms and possibilities in thought and practice in addressing the fundamental issues of life and living" (Karenga "Names and Notions" 61).

2. Academic excellence – "requires both rigorous and relevant research, scholarship and teaching, which expand our knowledge and understanding of ourselves, others, and the world and the possibilities inherent in each" (Karenga "Names and Notions" 61).

3. Social responsibility – "requires and embrace of the African epistemological understanding that knowledge is not simply acquired for knowledge sake, but for human sake, indeed for the sake of the world ... to bring, increase, and sustain good in the world" (Karenga "Names and Notions" 61).

All of these characteristics are found in the work of Welsh, which are centered in culture.

It must be noted here that Black Studies is a multidisciplinary branch of study and as a discipline, and according to Karenga, includes seven basic fields: Black History, Black Religion, Black Social Organization, Black Politics, Black Economics, Black Creative Production and Black Psychology.[4] Collectively, these fields provide a more holistic approach to the study (and understanding) of the Black experience (Karenga 24). Welsh's study, understanding, creation, and teaching of African dance, a component of Black Creative Production, is unquestionably more comprehensive and culturally affirming because she approaches dance from an African center (an Afrocentric perspective), and considers both its aesthetic and functional purpose; that is, to share (or send) a message. For Welsh, dance is "movement vocabulary" (Welsh and Nance 1). Robert W. Nicholls agrees with this concept and contends that dancers create movements that speak both the language of the drum and the meaning of the dance itself (55). This perspective requires a deeper-than-surface-level "reading" of the dance. In other words, African dance is more than merely entertainment.

Afrocentricity Defined

Afrocentricity, as defined by Molefi Kete Asante, is a "mode of thought and action" that places "African interests, values and perspectives" at the center of any analyses of African phenomena (*Afrocentricity* 2). It is an intellectual paradigm that acknowledges the value in (and need for) culturally centered investigations that must be rooted in the knowledge of the shared experience, worldview, and culture of Black

people.[5] Afrocentricity is a unifying paradigm from which numerous theories and methods are created by diverse African-centered scholars to explore and explain phenomena from the insider's perspective; that is, the perspective of African people.[6] Afrocentricity is the approach to the information or data, rather than the information itself, and it positions African people as the subject of history (versus an object or a *victim) (Asante, Afrocentricity* 2*, Afrocentric Manifesto* 2, 3, 5, 64; *Yancy and Asante* 4).

To Be African and to Dance African

For this essay, I draw upon Welsh's definition of what it means to be African. For Welsh, Africa is more than a physical location or even a continent for that matter. It is a worldview, and an evolving idea or philosophy founded on experiences of (and with) hierarchy, race, ethnicity, history, and economics. Within this African center and consciousness, there is a responsibility connected to African dance. In many African societies, as stated above, the purpose of dance is to communicate a message. It is:

> not simply a motion set to music but rather a mechanism for cementing ongoing familial-like relationships, building cooperative communities, and communicating value systems that prioritize cohesion and consensus. Dance is not merely for performance, but rather a participatory means through which communities are able to embody and demonstrate their values in physical space (Welsh et al. 6).

The perspective of dance as a form of language and social commentary aligns with the concept of African art as functional. This is in agreement with the philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois (who asserts that all art is propaganda); Amiri Baraka (who calls for Black art as an advocate of social change); and Larry Neal (who asserts that Black art is a nationalistic project, and one that should be envisioned as "an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (Neal 1). This perspective is a significant practice of Umfundalai.

In addition, the Umfundalai technique serves as a statement of the enduring bond between Africa and her Diaspora. Dance has been an integral part of African reality for most (if not all) of African existence. It is one of the oldest African art forms. More than 3,000 years ago, in Kemet,[7] Africans drew images of dance and dancers on ancient papyri. There are ancient images of dance on walls and in caves

in North Africa (Algeria), and on rocks and in caves in South Africa. Pearl Primus, the esteemed anthropologist, dancer, and choreographer asserts, "Dance is the soul of Africa. It is the foundation of all the arts and it weaves a tale about the daily lives of the people" (Welsh et al. 21).

Umfundalai as Cultural Resistance

Umfundalai speaks to the intellect and ingenuity of a people determined to exist, to create, and to evolve. This preservation of tradition is considered a form of cultural resistance, defined by Karenga as "the retention, creation and use of culture to inspire and sustain the struggle for freedom and maintain one's humanity" (116). Dance was one of the most distinctive retentions. Welsh explains in a 2011 interview:

> When the enslaved Africans were brought up from the bowels of the ship to exercise, they drew from their ethnic heritages so that there was a mixture of rhythms and movements that would not have existed prior to enslavement. This mixing and synthesis continued on the plantations along with inclusion of movements that the enslaved Africans observed from watching the dances of the overseers and masters (Glocke 1).[8]

American Africans carry movements and meaning in their ancestral memory (and as was the intent of some enslavers), they also carry linguistic mixes representing various communities and cultural practices.[9]

African Consciousness, Retentions, and Survival

E. Franklin Frazier asserts that Africans of the Diaspora were completely disconnected from their African culture and heritage during enslavement. Afrocentric scholarship, however, challenges this idea and recognizes the existence of cultural carryovers. Joseph Holloway asserts that African retentions and Africanisms (linguistic retentions) persist. Both Welsh and Julie B. Johnson refer to this form of collective memory as "epic memory" (Welsh et al. 27, 61). Alvin Ailey refers to it as "blood memory ... a remembering, a re-conjuring of a past that one may not remember cognitively but viscerally recalls"[10] (Welsh et al. 39). Tommy L.

Lott, in "African Retentions," refers to the phenomenon as "cultural retention" (170) and "African retention" (173, 176).

Molefi Kete Asante and Welsh assert that the connections between Africa and her Diaspora were never fully severed; "Africa-consciousness, in varying degrees, good and bad, has always been part of the psyche of the African people, in forced exile in South America, the Caribbean Islands, and in the United States" (Asante and Welsh 157). Many other scholars also acknowledge that these retentions (or memories) persist.[11] This raises the question, if African dance, as Welsh asserts, is a form of word movement or language, wouldn't dance vocabulary with its retentions/Africanisms also persist alongside the other forms of language?

Welsh asserts that African culture, despite the many efforts of Europeans to "obliterate" it, survived. When enslaved Africans were forbidden (sometimes by the law) to engage in their traditional dances, they resisted by coding the movements. According to Welsh, "These restrictions served to drive many traditions underground and/or create new and veiled meanings that would be satisfactory to the colonial governors and missionaries (*African Dance* 113). In fact, African dance has survived and triumphed (*African Dance* 115). Welsh provides the history, circumstances and spirit of the movements in her choreography and lessons.

Umfundalai retains an ancient tradition while making space for new rhythms and movements, all rooted in African and African Diasporic experiences. The movements are distinct, yet connected by a "bedrock" of African-based dances" (Welsh et al. 1). This is a form of cultural retention and synthesis. The combining of the contemporary and traditional can also be considered a multifaceted form of communication, similar to the concept of multilingual (or polyphonic) communication in spoken word and music.

The Makings of an Afrocentric Creative

Carole Ann Welsh was born in Thomasville, North Carolina on September 22, 1949, eighty-six years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation (and eighty-four years after its enforcement in Galveston, Texas). She was the oldest of three children born to Ruth Hoover. When she was a child, her family relocated to Brooklyn, New York, where she was raised. Welsh reflects on watching and learning from the older girls playing double dutch in the street[12] and remembers their

rhythmic chanting. It is in these rhythms and movements that she learned to "catch the beat," she writes:

> 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 and Nance 1).[13]

At the age of fifteen, Welsh began dance training. Though fifteen was considered old to begin dance training, she more than made up for the time, and by the next year, had joined the Ron Davis Jazz Dance Company. The company toured historically Black colleges in the South and provided a front row seat to the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. A pivotal moment of her young dance education was meeting Pearl Reynolds, who became her teacher and mentor for the next fifteen years.

> I always give thanks and praise to Pearl because she planted so many seeds in my being and many of them took root. She was an extraordinary Dunham teacher and I studied Dunham with her intensely. My development of the Umfundalai technique definitely stands on the shoulders of the Katherine Dunham technique (Welsh in Glock 253).

Honoring the ancestors in this way is characteristic of Afrocentric philosophy and practice. In fact, within the Afrocentric paradigm, one of the seven core cultural African characteristics, as identified by Karenga, is ancestor veneration. According to Karenga, "to say African philosophy, worldview or values is to assume certain shared orientations based on similar cultural experiences. Among these shared orientations are: (1) the centrality of community; (2) respect for tradition; (3) a high-level spirituality and ethical concern; (4) harmony with nature; (5) the sociality of selfhood; (6) veneration of ancestors; and (7) the unity of being" (*Introduction to Black Studies* 78).

In the early 1970s, as Welsh became more conscious of (and centered in) her Africanness, Carole Ann took the name, Kariamu, a Kiswahili term meaning "one

who reflects the moon." An artist and a scholar, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in English (1972) and Master of Arts in Humanities (1975) from State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1993, Kariamu Welsh earned her Ph.D. in Dance History from New York University. Over the course of her career and service to the community, she received many awards, honors, grants, and fellowships, including (but not limited to) a Pew Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and three Senior Fulbright Scholar Awards.

Welsh taught in the Department of African American Studies and in the Department of Dance at Temple University. She was the founding Artistic Director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe; the Director of the Temple University Institute for African Dance Research and Performance; and Co-Founder of the Center for Positive Thought. Welsh taught in the academy and in the global community, educating, training, and inspiring dancers, choreographers, and scholars alike.

Scholarly Texts

Welsh has written and edited numerous books, articles, and chapters on African and American African dance, including: *A Guide to African and American African 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); *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices, an Aesthetic Analysis* (2000); *African Dance: World of Dance* (2010); and *Iwe Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook* (2017).

In *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* (a 1995 collection of essays by diverse and global African dancers, scholars, and ethnomusicologists, edited by Welsh), she presents essays that examine African dance on the African continent (Nigeria), in the U.S., Brazil, and the Caribbean. Interwoven through the multiple essays in the four sections of the book ("Tradition," "Tradition and Continuity," "Tradition Transformed," and "Tradition Contextualized") is a connected (and major) theme of movement/dance and rhythm as language:

> The earth and sky are relatives. The earth speaks to the sky and receives answers through the things which grow upward upon her. The dancer is one of her voices ... The professional African dancer is one trained from childhood to be a dancer. Having shown a special aptitude for dance language, he is

> apprenticed to a master, usually the oldest and most powerful of the dancers (Primus qtd. in Welsh *African Dance* 7).

In *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities*, a 2019 volume of essays by scholars, teachers, dancers and other artists that challenges misinformed assumptions about African dance, Welsh connects dance to social activism and social change, which can both be achieved through community engagement (which she practiced). Welsh, Diouf, and Daniel, who edited the volume, define African dance as "a social institution predicated on mobility, an institution established to reward innovation and 'tradition,' to revere generosity and inclusion, and to value respect for the elders, ancestors, and cosmological spirits" (6). This centers the reader squarely within the Afrocentric paradigm.

Umfundalai: An African Dance Technique was published in 2003. In this text, she defines the Umfundalai technique as "a Pan-African contemporary dance technique [that] was developed as a means to access and utilize movement traditions that exist in Africa and the Diaspora" (2). The technique builds on the foundations of African Diasporan dance traditions and incorporates movements from the various ethnic groups within the many nations on the continent of Africa and throughout her American African Diaspora. In studying these traditions, Welsh observed common aesthetic elements in the dances. Those elements form the collective core of the Umfundalai technique.

The development of the Umfundalai technique took root in the 1950s and 1960s as West African dance became popular in the U.S. and many dance companies came to the U.S. to settle. From the beginning, Welsh admits she wanted to express herself in African dance, but she wanted to do it in a contemporary vein. This wasn't as easy to do as it sounds. There was a noted "colonial European distaste" for African dance, yet there was also a strong African resistance, and as Welsh writes, a "resilience, constantly seeping in and invading the boundaries of racism, colorism, classism, and postcolonial coloniality" (Welsh et al. 14).

She further developed the Umfundalai technique during her travels to the African continent and within the American African Diaspora. She didn't just watch the dancers and dances, she studied the culture, including the history and traditions. She lived in Zimbabwe for two years studying the dance and culture and created

techniques and choreography that demonstrated the commonalities and unique qualities of African continental and American African dance.

African dances from Western, Central, and Southern Africa are the foundations of American African dance techniques, in both movement and message. The dancers' training fosters cultural and identity affirmation, presents commentary on social conditions, and engages in cultural pedagogy. The Umfundalai technique has a two-fold pedagogy: (1) students must study the culture from which the dance is created in order to understand and appreciate (respect) the dance, and (2) the Umfundalai technique is founded in African cosmology (the belief in the physical and spirit connection, the seen and unseen). The visual form of communication (or language) in the Umfundalai technique assists in building "movement vocabulary" by utilizing the "vocabulary of the traditional dances" (Welsh et al, 89; Welsh and Nance 74; Welsh 23).

Kariamu Welsh transitioned into the ancestral realm on October 12, 2021, at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Her legacy includes the Umfundalai technique, which has been taught, practiced and performed on college campuses, and in community organizations, school auditoriums, conferences, and festivals (locally, nationally and internationally), for more than fifty years. The global presence and embrace of the Umfundalai technique reinforce the unifying Pan-Africanist nature of her technique, which combines the old and the new, considers the sacred, nurtures the pedagogical, and creates pathways for future evolutions of American African dance and identity. The Umfundalai technique does not seek to align with European dance; it stands proudly and powerfully, as African. When we "dare to be" ourselves, as Welsh directs in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, we are truly unified and free. May Dr. Kariamu Welsh be pleased.

Notes

[1] Welsh clarifies, "If we understand that 'technique' means a means and mode of learning, then it is clear that there are many African and Diasporan dance techniques." Glocke, Aime "When The Past Dances Into The Future: An interview with African-Centered Dance Scholar, Dr. Kariamu Welsh." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 4, no. 6, (15 September 2011), 253.

[2] The term, "American African" is used in this essay as Welsh, Diouf and Daniel termed it in their 2019 edited edition of *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities*. In this form, "American" is the modifier and "African" is the subject. The term asserts a Pan-Africanist perspective and proposes a Diasporic connection of Africa's people, no matter the nationality (e.g., Chinese African, French African, German African, etc.). Welsh, Kariamu; Diouf, Esailama; Yvonne Daniel, *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019). Also, see, Welsh, Kariamu and C. Kemal Nance. "Iwé Illanan: A Umfundalai Teacher's Handbook." *The Organization of Umfundalai Teachers* (2017).

[3] Karenga, Maulana, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 25.

[4] Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 24. These are in alignment with the seven areas of Black culture as defined by Karenga ("spirituality and ethics, history, social organization, economic organization, political organization, creative production and ethos").

[5] Alkebulan, Adisa A., "Defending the Paradigm." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol 37, no. 3, (January 2007), 410.

[6] Afrocentricity is non-hierarchical and pluralistic. It should not be considered the "opposite" of Eurocentrism, a paradigm that positions Europe at the top of the hierarchy.

[7] Kemet is the ancient name for Egypt.

[8] Smitherman, Geneva, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 4, 5. This synthesis of movement, rhythm and technique is also found in the oral language of American Africans. Ebonics (sometimes called "Black English Vernacular (BEV)" and "African American Vernacular English (AAVE))" is a rule-governed language created out of the same conditions as American African dance. It demonstrates the same genius of a people.

[9] Philip, M. Nourbese and Evie Schockley, "Discourse on the Logic of Language." *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1989), 30. In an attempt to limit communication and prevent planning for liberation efforts and uprisings, enslavers mixed as many ethnolinguistic groups of enslaved Africans as possible.

[10] For further discussion, see Graham, Martha, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) and Daniel, Yvonne, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Voudou, Cuban Yoruba and Bahian Candomblé'* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

[11] Patton, Venetria K., *The Grasp That Reaches Beyond the Grave : The Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts*. 1st ed., (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013).

[12] Double Dutch is a popular East Coast jump rope game played with two long ropes turned in opposite directions by two rope turners while the jumper(s) hop over the ropes. It is a very rhythmic game that often involves gymnastics, dance and improvised moves, as well as other tricks.

[13] Owens, Cassie, "Kariamu Welsh, 72, A Dance Pioneer Who Made Students Want To Live Up To Their History, Dies." (*Philadelphia Inquirer* [Philadelphia, PA], 19 Oct. 2021). In later years, during Welsh's study of African dance, she recognized the African connections in the childhood activity.

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