

# **“REINVENTION: UMFUNDALAI MEN DANCE MASCULINITIES”R LES CHEMINS DE L’EXIL”**

**C. Kemal Nance<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** In October 2014, the Federal University of Bahia hosted the International Colloquium of Black Art: Body, Performance, and Ancestrality, a lecture and workshop series that featured African dance scholars from around the world. As an invited lecturer, I presented a synopsis of my doctoral research that explored the gendered experiences of African American men who study and perform the Ufundalai technique of contemporary African dance. The dissertation, “Brothers of the Bah Yah!: The Pursuit of Maleness in

the Ufundalai Tradition of African Dance,” employs an autoethnographic lens to examine what Sara Ahmed in her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, would describe as the “oblique existence” of the 13 African American men, who dance Ufundalai since its beginning by examining maleness, an experienced gendered agency, among its male practitioners. The word brothers in the title refers to the unique bond shared by the dancing men of this African-centered movement system, and “Bah Yah” refers to the vocal intonations characteristic of Ufundalai pedagogy. The dissertation presents the lived experiences of eight of Ufundalai’s 13 men and the impact they have had on their gender roles, performance and identity. This article, “Reinvention: Ufundalai Men Dance Masculinities” is the lecture version of the larger dissertation.

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**Keywords:** Gender. Ufundalai Technique. Ancestrality.

Ufundalai is “a contemporary African dance technique that draws movements from African and Diasporan dances and represents an approach to movement that is wholistic, body centric and organic.”<sup>2</sup> Kariamu Welsh has been developing the Ufundalai contemporary African dance technique since 1970. As one of the first men to study the technique, Ufundalai reified a North American

<sup>2</sup> Kariamu Welsh, Interview by C. Kemal Nance, Glen-side, Pennsylvania, December 21, 2012.



African male identity, empowering me to navigate American and African American social scripts that posit dancing as a non-masculine activity. As researcher and subject, I forward a multi-modal inquiry, drawing on Max van Manen's *hermeneutic phenomenology* and Anselm Strauss's *applied grounded theory*, as well as *historical description* and *dance analysis* for data collection and analysis methods. *Brothers of the Bah Yáh* is framed as a multi-layered study that applies phenomenological values and procedures to forward an auto-ethnographic intention. Sources of data include interviews with seven Umfundalai men, Umfundalai's progenitor and first dance master; an in-depth research journal recording my own lived experience descriptions and memories of dancing Umfundalai; and videos of selected Umfundalai repertory, adding historical and dance analytic perspectives.

As with the dissertation, "Reinvention: Umfundalai Men Dance Masculinities" reviews seminal works in masculine studies, highlighting the social function of masculinities as scripted and learned ideals. This review of literature also illuminates the dearth of resources that theorize the African American presence in African dance on the American concert stage. It presents a historical analysis of the emergence of a male presence in Umfundalai since 1993, including male-inspired developments in the technique. As with the doctoral research, it reveals that performing Umfundalai choreography affords an opportunity for men to dance a self-determined construction of gender performance and that Umfundalai studio practice can be a site for men's affirmation of their 'dancer' identities as well as friction with gender performance. While the technique's progenitor developed Umfundalai's movement system with a gender-neutral approach, the continuance of Umfundalai by its dance masters ushered a gendered Umfundalai in which movement and performance were aligned with scripted conventional masculine tropes.

The actual pursuit of maleness as mentioned in the dissertations' title points to a unique actualization experienced by the researcher at the point of analysis. The other men in this study found a gendered agency outside of their Umfundalai experiences. Moreover, the men in this

study largely draw on conventional masculinities, namely strength and power, to feel their maleness. This also inspired the title of this iteration of the research, "Reinvention." The dancing men also experience a spirituality of solidarity as a function of their embodied masculinity while dancing Umfundalai choreography and observing other men dancing with them.

Ultimately, "Reinvention: Umfundalai Men Dance Masculinity" and "Brothers of the Bah Yah!: The Pursuit of Maleness in the Umfundalai Tradition of African Dance" conclude that gender performance as described by Umfundalai's dancing men have currency in sports and in the larger American and African American communities out of which Umfundalai's dance culture emerges. Strength, Power, and spirituality situated in similitude represent commonalities of male experiences. However, Umfundalai choreography can house multiple masculinities. Dances like Kariamuwelsh's *Raaahmonaaah!* and my *Genesis: The Royal Dance of Kings* can serve as portals for masculinities that dismantle the hegemony that erodes the community in which it exists. They empower the dancing man to redefine these commonalities as a force that dismantles racism, sexism, and homophobia.

### **Reinvention: Umfundalai Men Dance Masculinities**

Dr. Kariamuwelsh has been developing the Umfundalai contemporary African dance technique since 1970. Welsh describes Umfundalai as "a contemporary African dance technique that draws movements from African and Diasporan dances. Umfundalai means essence or essential in Kiswahili ... Umfundalai represents a particular approach to movement that is wholistic, body centric and organic. It is an open, fluid and porous technique in that it encourages additions to the technique and absorbs new ideas and directions as it evolves."<sup>3</sup> Umfundalai is Pan-African, drawing on the values, rituals, movement practices, and

<sup>3</sup> Kariamuwelsh, Interview by C. Kemal Nance, Glenside, Pennsylvania, December 21, 2012.



language of African people around the world, including the Americas. While Welsh describes Umfundalai as body centric, it has represented a movement system that underscores racial and often gendered ideologies. It is a choreographic tool that empowers the artistic message of the artists who uses it; the artist a conduit for it the contemporary shape the technique assumes.<sup>4</sup>

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed theorizes ‘orientation’ as a pre-determined albeit heteronormative position of focus by which one is often socialized to see the world around him/her. Queering phenomenology, as she describes it, explores an “oblique existence,” one illuminated by a trajectory of sight that only a shift in orientation would avail.<sup>5</sup> This article and the larger doctoral research out of which this article emerges sets out to “queer” Umfundalai, to offer a discourse and a history that emerges from an African American male perspective. In the 45 years that Umfundalai impacting dancers with its African-centered philosophies and movement systems, how do African American dancing men experience gender in Umfundalai’s evolving movement tradition?

I approach this research question as both researcher and subject. I was introduced to Umfundalai as a college freshman at Swarthmore College in September of 1988. Since that time, I have aggressively studied the technique and danced principal roles in Umfundalai’s professional demonstration companies, Kariamum & Company and Kariamum & Company: Traditions, eventually serving as the companies’ Associate Artistic Director. I earned certification as a both a Umfundalai teacher and master teacher. I began the organization of Umfundalai Teachers and currently oversee the certification processes for aspiring Umfundalai instructors.

For me, Umfundalai has informed and empowered my identity as North American African

man and in so doing empowered me to navigate the counterproductive tropes of masculinity that I had encountered growing up. Chief among them was that dancing was a non-masculine activity. So as I approach with curiosity about the extent to which other African American men had experienced a congruent sense of empowerment. I wondered how their experience in Umfundalai dialoged with their understanding of their gender roles, performance and identity.

### Toward a Methodology for Dancing Men



Figure 1 - C. Kemal Nance, PhD performs Kariamum Welsh's *Taking Flight* in February 2008 at Temple University's Conwell Dance Theater in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photography: Bill H.

This study documents the unwritten history of Umfundalai’s male legacy. To this end, it is important to me that the actual names of subjects be used in the dissertation so that their authentic voices and contributions can be represented. This lack of anonymity, however, had the potential to create anxiety about discussing sensitive topics, for

<sup>4</sup> Kariamum Welsh-Asante, “Commonalities in African Dance” in *African Culture The Rhythms of Unity* ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamum Welsh Asante, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 12.

example, sexuality, for fear of personal vulnerability or judgment. The lack of anonymity had the potential for self-censorship. Further, this study focuses on men’s experiences in a specific social-cultural context. The intra-cultural focus on men who study Umfundalai prohibits the generalization of findings to other African dance settings.

As it turns out, I (pictured in Figure 1) am one of the first men to study Umfundalai and perform with its professional demonstration company since 1970. I use my experience as a male Umfundalai student and eventual professional performer as a delimitation for this study. For this reason, I use autoethnography to uncover “oblique existence” of the 13 African American men who studied Umfundalai and performed with its professional demonstration companies, Kariamú & Company and Kariamú & Company: Traditions.

More specifically, Brothers of the Bah Yah’ has an autoethnographic intention. As Carol Ellis suggests I start with my own experience as one of the first men of Umfundalai to inform my inquiry.

I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use ... systematic introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life.<sup>6</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 2, this study integrates *hermeneutic phenomenology*, *applied grounded theory*, *dance analysis and historical description* for data collection and analysis. *Brothers of the Bah Yah* is framed as a multi-layered study that draws on phenomenological values and procedures to forward an autoethnographic intention.

Sources of data include interviews with seven of Umfundalai’s dancing men, along with two crucial female informants – Kariamú Welsh and Glendola Yhema Mills, an in-depth research journal

recording my own lived experience descriptions and memories of dancing Umfundalai, and videos of selected Umfundalai repertory, which adds a historical/dance analysis perspective.

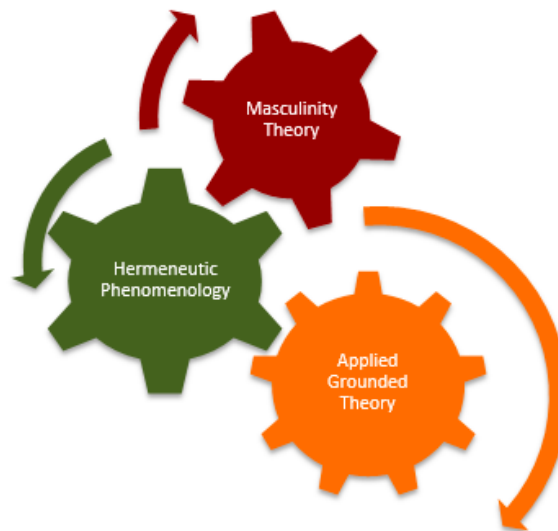


Figure 2 - A Multi-Modal Methodology<sup>7</sup>

The interview protocol involved a two-phase process. With each male participant, I first conducted a one-hour phenomenological interview, following up one to two days later with a more hermeneutic, grounded theory approach that drew on themes arising from coding and analysis of the first interview as well as specific theoretical interests - for example, the construct of cool that pervades Black masculinity theory. For all phenomenological interviews, I endeavored to bracket my theoretical assumptions around masculinity and maleness.

After the two interviews with the first participant, the hermeneutic phase, or phase 2, of subsequent conversations incorporated additional questions or topics from previous interviews in a cumulative manner. Data analysis was thus concurrent with the interview process, involving constant comparison between participants and over time.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Ellis & Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative: Reflexivity Research as Subject,” In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), 733-768.

<sup>7</sup> C. Kemal Nance, “Brothers of the Bah Yah: The Pursuit of Maleness in the Umfundalai Tradition of African Dance,” (PhD diss., Temple University, 2014)



## Black Dancing Men: An Oversight in Masculine Studies Literature

In “Brothers of the Bah Yah!” I provide a review of current literature in masculine studies. While neither phenomenology nor classical grounded theory as articulated by Barney Glaser discuss data collection with a specific theoretical framework, for me the background reading completed during doctoral coursework was a “lived experience” in itself.<sup>89</sup> The title of the literature review in the dissertation, “Masculine Literature; Insight, Hindsight, Oversight,” alluded to the layered nature of supporting literature for this study. Insight referred to the profile of male experiences as theorized by current sociology and masculine studies scholars. Hindsight called on the phenomenological method of remembering and locates my voice, as autoethnographer in the literature; Oversight alluded to the void in dance literature, the gendered experiences of African American men in African dance. As both researcher and subject, my starting place for excavating relevant literature was masculinities.

Arthur Brittain offers three premises for understanding masculinity as a function of identity: (1) the socialization case which says that men are ‘socialized’ to be males by the culture in which they reside, (2) the masculine crisis theory that purports that men act differently from what society prescribes; and (3) the reality construction model that asserts that gender fluctuates according to time and how individuals see themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Chris Blazina describes masculinities as cultural myths and alludes to a tension between men’s expected role in society and what they—we—actually experience.<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler equates

gender with a stylization of the body, suggesting that emerges from reiterative acts that creates the illusion of naturalness over time.<sup>12</sup>

Largely, masculine studies literature negates the premise that masculinity is necessitated by biological determination. It is learned. For this research, I employ John Gagnon’s intrapsychic sexual scripts, the internalized social messages human beings negotiate in acting on their desire, as the mode inquiry to explore Umfundalai men’s gendered experiences.<sup>13</sup>

With the masculinities of dancing men in the foreground, Michael Gard’s theory regarding the male dancer is salient. He writes, “Rather than the male dancer being a self-evident thing, he can be seen as a discursive ‘project’ in much the same way as the ‘self.’

In his book, *Men Who Dance, Athleticism, Aesthetics and the Art of Masculinity*, he references Ramsay Burt’s theories about the male body as spectacle and argues that middle class anxiety about virility coupled with the boy’s inability differentiate the homo social from the homosexual has rendered the dancing male a non-masculine project in the United States.

Doug Risner’s research of pre-professional programs reveal that dance teachers access many resources including making dance seem more ‘sports-like’ to appease the reluctant and presumably heterosexual student. I think it is important to acknowledge the contribution of Gard’s and Risner’s research to what I consider and under theorized are of dance studies. Similarly, I point out that while his book is title *Men Who Dance*, his subjects were 40 Australian men who work in ballet and modern dance styles.<sup>14</sup> Risner focused on male participation pre-professional or

<sup>8</sup> Barney G. Glaser, *Emergence vs. Forcing Basis of Grounded Theory Analysis*, (Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Brittain, *Masculinity and Power*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Blazina, *The Cultural Myths of Masculinity*, (Connecticut: Praeger Publishing) 2003), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Gagnon, *An Interpretation of Desire Essays in the Study of Sexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 95-107.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Gard, *Men Who Dance Aesthetics, Athletics and the Art of Masculinity*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008)

ballet, contemporary, and/or modern classes.<sup>15</sup>

So, what do we make of an African American masculinity and its potential role in contemporary African Dance?

In a book titled *Black Rage in 1968*, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, wrote that

For the black man in this country, it is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel it his own. Whereas the white man regards his manhood as ordained right, the black man is engaged in a never-ending battle for its possession.<sup>16</sup>

Grier and Cobbs were among the first of many theorists who posit African American masculinity as a response to white masculinity. Nathan Mc Call offers “cool pose” as the embodiment of Black men’s rejection of the privileges of white male rule. Feminist scholar, bell hooks, describe “coolness” as the Black man’s acceptance of reality, refusal to accept white masculinity but the definition of himself by his own terms.<sup>17</sup>

Largely, African American masculinity has been characterized by coolness which ultimately depends on white masculinity, its antithesis, for its definition. Theorist, Janheinz Jahn would refer to this as a skokian paradigm.<sup>18</sup>

More insight in masculine studies would reveal that contemporary writers including but not limited to Athena Matua, Mark Anthony Neal advocate for more multiplicitous notions of masculinity that stand up to sexism, racism, and homophobia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Doug Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance*, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 51-59.

<sup>16</sup> William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage*, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 59.

<sup>17</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool Black Men and Masculinity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 147.

<sup>18</sup> Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu African Culture and the Western World*, (New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Athena D. Matua, *Progressive Black Masculinities*, (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 7. One of the theories that supports Matua’s ‘progressive Black masculinities’ is multidimensionality. She asserts that Black men are diverse by class, sexuality, religion, and

<sup>20</sup> The oversight is the theory that addresses the presence of African dance masculinities on the American concert stage. This research is an attempt to illuminate an otherwise invisible phenomenon, the gendered experiences of African American men who perform contemporary African dance.

### A Male Umfundalai History

In “Dancing in my Mother’s Mother’s Body: Transmutation and Synthesis of African Dance Culture in Kariamu Welsh-Asante’s Umfundalai Dance Technique,” Umfundalai’s first Dance master, Glendola Yhema Mills, documents the evolution of the Umfundalai technique, citing five developmental “phases” she discovered in one of Kariamu Welsh’s unpublished works (1994).<sup>21</sup> The first, the Nationalist Phase (1968 to 1972), stemmed from Welsh’s involvement with the Black Arts movement in which her heightened level of community consciousness spawned artistic ways of expressing African American experiences. The second phase, Developmental Period (1973 to 1975), gives way to the Black Dance Workshop in Buffalo, New York, a student dance company of African American women who sought to create work that uniquely expressed their ‘Blackness’. During the third phase (1976 to 1979), Welsh explored other dance techniques including Graham, Dunham, Primus, and neo-traditional African dances, providing her with more creative resources that formalized how she taught movement.

The fourth phase, the Africa Period (1979 to 1983), ushered in Welsh’s mentor, Pearl Reynolds, third generation Dunham dancer who trained Welsh in Katherine Dunham’s technique and advised her as she directed her company, Black Dance Workshop. Katherine Dunham’s work served as a foundation for Umfundalai. During this period Welsh comes to fully understand the importance of cultural validity as it pertains to dance pedagogy and the visceral concept of

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other systems of subordination.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man*, (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 1-30.

<sup>21</sup> Kariamu Welsh, e-mail to the author, May 4, 2014.



“groundedness.” This phase is also characterized by Welsh’s tenure as Artistic Director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe. During the Africa phase Umfundalai’s rituals and protocol were established and the *lapa*<sup>22</sup> became standard female attire for dance classes.<sup>23</sup>

Mills’ participation in Umfundalai including her doctoral research is situated in what Welsh identifies as the Philadelphia phase (1983 to 2014),<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> the fifth phase of the technique’s development. Welsh’s move to Philadelphia brought on a synthesis of previous phases. Live percussion, which usually involved a male musician, becomes a standard practice. While she stopped performing her own choreography during this period (1983),<sup>26</sup> her completion of doctoral studies (1993)<sup>27</sup> and intense work with youth and young adult dancers codified the Umfundalai vocabulary.<sup>28</sup> Mills becomes the first dance master and writes the definitive text on the Umfundalai technique with her dissertation. Upon Mills’ dissertation completion in 1995, the Philadelphia phase was the most current stage of development and the phase in which I, the eventual

second dance master, entered Umfundalai’s history. I posit that a subsidiary phase has developed in Philadelphia since 1995. This phase includes a yet undescribed facet of Umfundalai’s evolution that Mills’ work does not address – the emergence of a male Umfundalai culture.

Just as Umfundalai has impacted its practitioners throughout all of its development phases, the “oblique existence” of its dancing men has made an indelible mark in its pedagogical practice and the presentation of classic Umfundalai repertory as rendered by Kariamumu & Company and Kariamumu & Company: Traditions. A historical analysis of men’s participation in Umfundalai, reveals nuanced changes it has undergone with the integration of men. Table 1 charts the significant moments in Umfundalai’s history that ushered by the presence of its male practitioners. Some of the key advancements include the following.

In February 1993, the First Umfundalai-trained male dancers perform with Kariamumu & Company. In July 1995, two technical and pedagogical changes occur in the Umfundalai technique experience. (1.) Male students dancing on the back line during the “across the floor” section of the class becomes a regular Umfundalai studio practice (2.) Men perform variation to the arm pattern associated with *The Nigerian stomp* when it is performed in single counts. February 1996, Kariamumu & Company, Umfundalai’s professional demonstration company, becomes Kariamumu & Company: Traditions. Stafford Berry and I become the first male certified Umfundalai teachers. Derrick Perkins becomes the fourth Umfundalai-trained male dancer to perform with (K&C). Stafford Berry, Derrick Perkins, and I perform in two classic all- female works Anthem (formerly known as Gestures) and *Raaahmonaaaah!* which eventually becomes *Raaahmonaaaah!* Revisited. February 1998, five Umfundalai-trained men dance with K&C in the homesession concert called *D’zimbabwe*. It marked the first time, a male image dominated the poster advertisement. Harvey Chism joins the company as the first Umfundalai trained male dancer whose primary teacher, the one who ushered him into Umfundalai’s dance culture, was another man- me.

<sup>22</sup> The *lapa*, also referred to as *wrappa*, is a piece of fabric worn around the waist that covers the pelvis and drapes down to any point beneath the knee. While men are free to wear *lapas*, it is standard dress for women in many West African traditions. It has been appropriated as standard dress for women in Umfundalai studio practice.

<sup>23</sup> Glendola Yhema Mills, “Dancing in my Mother’s Body: Transmutation and Synthesis of African Dance Culture in Kariamumu Welsh-Asante’s Umfundalai Dance Technique,” (EdD diss., Temple University, 1995), 97-98.

<sup>24</sup> When Mills completed her dissertation, the Philadelphia Phase was the current phase of Umfundalai’s development. In recent correspondence, Welsh identified 2014 as the Philadelphia Phase’s end.

<sup>25</sup> Kariamumu Welsh, e-mail message to author, May 7, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Kariamumu Welsh, e-mail message to author, May 4, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Kariamumu Welsh-Asante, “Zimbabwean Dance: an Aesthetic Analysis of the Jerusarema and Muchongoyo Dances,” (D.A. diss., New York University, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Glendola Yhema Mills, “Dancing in My Mother’s Body,” 97-99.

Table 1: A Male History in Umfundalai<sup>29</sup>

DATE	EVENT
September 1988	C. Kemal Nance takes his first Umfundalai dance class with Kariamum Welsh-Asante at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.
June to August 1989	C. Kemal Nance teaches Umfundalai to Swarthmore College Upward Bound students. Among his students was best friend Stafford C. Berry, Jr.
September 1989	Stafford C. Berry, Jr. takes Umfundalai with Glendola Rene Mills-Parker at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
February 1993	Stafford C. Berry, Jr., Abdur-Rahim Jackson and C. Kemal Nance become first Umfundalai-trained male dancers to perform with Kariamum & Company at Temple University in Philadelphia. Modern dancer Troy Barnes is among the performers. C. Kemal Nance performs his first leading role in Kariamum Welsh-Asante's <i>The King Must Die</i> .
September 1993	C. Kemal Nance begins teaching Umfundalai at Swarthmore College as dance faculty.
September 1994	Stafford C. Berry, Jr., Candace Hundley, and C. Kemal Nance form a Umfundalai-based dance company, <i>The Seventh Principle</i> .
July 1995	The Institute of African Dance Research and Performance hosts the first weeklong Umfundalai Intensive at the Community Education Center and Freedom Theater in Philadelphia. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mill develops a new arm variation for men in the Nigerian Stomp progression.</li> <li>• Welsh requires men to dance together behind the women during the 'across the floor' section of class; this becomes standard practice for Umfundalai teaching.</li> </ul>
November 1995	Glendola Yhema Mills completes her EdD in Dance at Temple University. Her dissertation title was "Dancing in my Mother's Mother's Body: Transmutation and Synthesis in Kariamum Welsh Asante's Umfundalai African Dance Technique."
February 1996	Kariamum Welsh-Asante changes the name of her company to Kariamum & Company: Traditions. Derrick Perkins joins Kariamum & Company: Traditions, becoming the fourth Umfundalai-trained male dancer to perform on the concert stage. Stafford C. Berry, Jr., C. Kemal Nance, and Derrick Perkins perform in two classic all female works, <i>Anthem</i> and <i>Raaahmonaaah!</i> Stafford C. Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance become the first male certified Umfundalai teachers by Kariamum Welsh and the Institute of African Dance Research and Performance.
October 2012	Kariamum Welsh premieres a male-inspired work, <i>Same Father Different Mother</i> , featuring male dancers Stafford C. Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance. Kariamum Welsh names new movement articulation, <i>K&amp;S Step</i> , after Nance and Berry.

<sup>29</sup> C. Kemal Nance, "Brothers of the Bah Yah: The Pursuit of Maleness in the Umfundalai Tradition of African Dance," (PhD diss., Temple University, 2014)

In February 2002, Kariamum Welsh in conjunction with the Institute of African Dance Research and Performance certifies me as the first male Umfundalai Dance master.





## A Umfundalai Male Discourse

Performance and pedagogy as illustrated in Figure 1 offers a useful schema in analyzing the gendered experiences of Umfundalai's men. While the former avails opportunities for men to dance a construction of their gender performance that they, themselves, customize, the latter offered both affirmation and realization of their identity as dancers as well as friction with their gender performance.

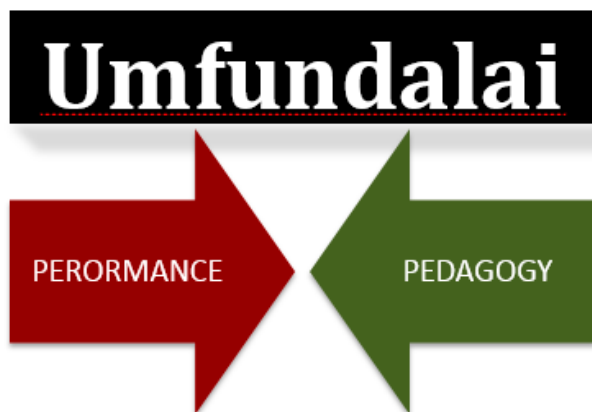


Figure 3: Schema for Umfundalai's embodied male experiences.<sup>30</sup>

Based on the interviews with Umfundalai's men, Welsh's *Raaahmonaaah!* (1989) emerges as an important performance work for an experienced masculinity. *Raaahmonaaah!* (1989) was loosely based on the 1986 incident in which the Philadelphia police department bombed a West Philadelphia block in efforts to evict MOVE members from their home. Ramona Africa and a twelve-year old Birdie Africa were the sole survivors of the travesty. Situated in the real life tale of MOVE, the dance is about African American women of protest.

*Raaaahmonaaah!*, the dance, can be characterized by the roles the dancers play out in the congruent narrative of the MOVE Story, Ramona Africa in white leotard and *lapas*, two of her alter egos dressed red leotards and *lapa*, John Africa, dressed in red *shokotoes*,<sup>31</sup> tank tops and head ties, and

<sup>30</sup> C. Kemal Nance, "Brothers of the Bah Yah"

<sup>31</sup> *Shokotoes* are drop-crotch pants that originate in the customs of the West African region. In Umfundalai, they represent the appropriate attire for men and allow

the spirits of the deceased who represent the chorus in *Raaahmonaaah!*'s narrative all of whom are dressed in black leotards and *lapas* (women) and black *shokotoes* and tank tops (men). While the original cast comprised of all female dancers, Figure 3 pictures the latest version of the dance performed at Temple University's Conwell Dance Theater in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in February 2013, that features of cast of dancing men and women. Since 2010, Welsh began renaming the dance *Raaahmonaaah! Revisited*. The dance can be characterized by the dancers' staunch facial expressions, discreet and defiant hip articulations, and angular—almost Kemetic—shapes. The close fitting leotards accentuate the curves of the female dancers' breasts, neck, and waists while the sleeveless tank tops worn by the men highlight the definition of the their arms. The *lapas* and *shokotoes* somehow visually situate the in a virtual Africa. The dance begins which the recitation of a poem written by Welsh that invokes the memories of the actual Move incident followed by shrill ululation and processional of red, black, and white cloaked Black bodies prancing across the space. The dances stomp, spin, and run through space as the drums swell and the narrative of real-life Move story unfolds.



Figure 4 - *Raaahmonaaah! Revisited* - This dance was performed at Temple University's Conwell Dance Theater in February 2013. Photography: Bill H.; Pictured: (Hinging to the floor, Left to Right) Danzel Thompson-Stout, Julian Darden, (Standing left to right) : Adrienne Ab-Salam, C. Kemal Nance, Crystal Fasanya, Nai-Whedai Sheriff, Ebony Webster, Yattah Blanton, Kendra Johnson, Shaness Kemp.

for men's gendered (masculine) alignment to an African aesthetic. As with men and the *lapa*, women can wear *shokotoes*, too.

As the interview data reveal that *Raaahmonaaab!* (1989) (*and Raaahmonaaab! Revisited*) and two of my works, *Genesis: the Royal Dance of Kings* (1996) and *Remembering So Well...* (2002) resonates loudly for Umfundalai men. Umfundalai choreography serves as a portal for many of them to experience a gendered agency and masculinity even without the gendered direction from respective choreographers. Neither Welsh nor I during the creative process for the aforementioned works gave the male dancers specific characters or masculine behavior edicts to follow. Yet, Stafford Berry cited his performance in *Raaahmonaaab!* as a moment during which he felt most masculine and offered the following description.

I feel strong as hell! I have the ear of everybody in the room, in the theater, back stage, up in the lighting booth, and beyond. I am a voice that matters, one that is heard aurally and layers underneath. ...I am fucking powerful! That is empowering to me and so there is this reciprocation happening, I latch onto it. I know that it was there. I feel grounded. It felt assured. It felt certain. I feel it all in my body and in my voice. I feel it not just in my body but in the space my body takes up.<sup>32</sup>

Berry's comments "about having the attention of everybody in the room" resonated with Derrick Perkins as well as he describes his performance in *Raaahmonaaab!* as "mannish!" He qualifies this superimposed masculinity with the performance of the Nigerian Stomp that compels audiences to pay attention. Demanding an audience to look at the performer by doing the *Nigerian Stomp*.

Dancing men, Charles Tyson and Khalil Munir speak about their connection with the male presence in the real life MOVE Story. For Khalil Munir this connection was "spiritual." He offer the following lived experience description:

Dancing *Raaahmonaaab!* was very spiritual for me. I had to learn the history of Osage Avenue, know that this didn't happen any place foreign

to me. This happened in Philadelphia! I had to talk about my people going through what they went through and had to translate that story on stage. I felt like we were speaking for them. So that connection of wanting to tell the story of MOVE and give it justice while being in the moment of taking on that story can be very spiritual.

Kariamuwelsh's *Raaahmonaaab!* (1989) and *Raaahmonaaab! Revisited* (2010), as well as my *Genesis: The Royal Dance of Kings* (1996) provide Umfundalai's dancing men with fertile ground for constructing maleness. Neither Welsh nor I gave our dancers specific instruction on how to project and create maleness in these works. The male essence, as it were, emanated from their self-perception.

### **Affirmation**

While the men in this study identify with and accept the term "dancer" as an identity, some of their entrée into professional dance exist singularly in their Umfundalai experience. To this end, many of us experienced an epiphany of our dancing ability through the acknowledgment of the primary instructor. For the older cadre of Umfundalai's dancing men, it was Kariamuwelsh and Yhema Mills, for the younger, it was I. Harvey Chism recalls such a moment in his Umfundalai education at Swarthmore College.

It could be something as simple as learning choreography for a piece and you had me demonstrate something to Jumatatu who was another great dancer. You'd say, "Harv, show Juma this." If you liked the way I executed a certain movement you would say, "I like that. Do it again. Do it again. Do it again. Do it again." And then, somehow, it would find its way into the choreography. That's a serious sense of affirmation as this was nothing more than a stylization. "Everybody look at Harv. Do that."<sup>33</sup>

The act of being heralded for dancing was significant among Umfundalai men. One

<sup>32</sup> Stafford C. Berry, Jr., Interview by C. Kemal Nance, Columbus, OH, May 13, 2012

<sup>33</sup> Harvey V. Chism, Jr., Interview by C. Kemal Nance, Boothwyn, PA, June 17, 2012



Umfundalai man, Derrick Perkins, changed the spelling of his name to reflect the transformation he underwent as a student of Umfundalai.

### ***Machismo***

Umfundalai means essence or essential in Kiswakhili. Umfundalai's progenitor, Kariamuwelsh, has always emphasized essence as the driving philosophical value that informs the embodiment of its Pan – African movement system. She describes it as “funky, blues,”<sup>34</sup> and even spiritual. While Welsh acknowledges the differences of men and women, her emphasis has been on the commonalities that make the movement African – not gendered.

Dance Master Yhema Mills, in continuing the tradition of Umfundalai, introduced a machismo as a movement quality for men to embody. For some of us it was met with confusion. For others, it presented a physical challenge. Ultimately, it was an attempt to define a men's way of moving. Mills described it through the masculine archetypes with which she was familiar as a Black woman raised in a Black community. It is significant in that “*machismo-ing*” (A term she borrowed from Latin American culture) began to articulate a gendered Umfundalai, one not intended by its progenitor.

As a dance master, while I did not use the term, *machismo*, I also participated in this project of ‘manning up’ Umfundalai. For Mills, his project included developing arm variation for men with some of the core vocabulary, namely the *Nigerian Stomp*. In this Umfundalai movement progression, dancers lift one knee. While the knee returns to the floor, he/she lifts the standing foot slightly so that both feet (heels) land on the floor at the same time. The movement is achieved in one count, one effort while the arms reach above the head. For the trained observer, the *Nigerian Stomp* looks like the *Lengen* dances of West Africa with the torso in an upright position. During the single-count part of the progression, the women negotiate a circular pattern with each arm in tandem. Mills advocated for the men to dance with a bent forearm, upright and parallel to the moving leg while the alternate

fist touches the elbow. This variation is now standard technique for the *Nigerian Stomp*.

*My machismo*, if you will, included the intentional integration of movement progressions from Neo–Traditional West African dance that accentuated athleticism and spastic movement qualities from its male performers. For instance, I would instruct the male students in my classes to perform the classic high-knee marches, fiercely contracted pectorial and bicep muscles, and ferocious head nods of the Guinean *Down Down Ba* across the floor while the women enjoyed hip-initiated vocabulary.

### ***Movement Assignment***

The conceptual integration of machismo resulted largely in movement assignment in studio practice. For some of the men in Umfundalai, name Charles Tyson, this was empowering. Like him, some enjoyed the idea of a specialized, male informed vocabulary. Tyson refers to another Mills' articulation for the Umfundalai undulation called the *Undressing*.

For others, like Jumatatu Poe, and Harvey Chism, there was resentment for not being allowed to embody the female movement. Poe states, “I didn't like being told that I had to do something because of something that I couldn't help, like being a guy, being a male.”<sup>35</sup>

### ***Findings***

The concluding chapter of “Brothers of the Bah Yah! The Pursuit of Maleness in the Umfundalai Tradition of African Dance” is named after the West African Adinkra Symbol, Sankofa, to reflect the circular quality of knowledge this research has afforded me as the researcher. “Return and get it,” the literal translation of the Adinkra symbol, reminds us to learn from the past in much the same way that the retrospective analysis of Umfundalai's dancing men's experiences provide instruction for men's continued presence in Umfundalai's dance culture.

<sup>34</sup> Kariamuwelsh.

<sup>35</sup> Jumatatu Poe, Interview by C. Kemal Nance, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, November 10, 2012.

In light of my lived experience as a subject in this study, I considered the potential for maleness in Umfundalai to have the makings of an Afrocentric enterprise at the onset of this research. Perhaps, an embodied understanding of Umfundalai's African philosophy allied with acceptance of one's gender performativity would align a dancing man's gender construction with a central focus on Africa at the point of analysis – a theoretical proposition that Afrocentricity's author, Molefi Asante, would argue is quintessential for an Afrocentric project<sup>36</sup>. The interview data of the Brothers of the Bah Yah suggest, with one exception, that the synthesis of gender and race or more specifically, being African American and male, is not a constitutive identity for the men in this study. As they discussed their meaningful experiences in Umfundalai, they punctuated either their 'blackness' or their masculinity.

As Ramsay Burt theorizes White masculinity as an "ulterior entity" upon which difference is "marked," and whiteness serves as an aesthetic standard, Blackness, as it emerges in this research, becomes an invisibilized discursive item among the 'Brothers of the Bah Yáh.' Blackness becomes "unmarked": it offers a universality. None of these dancing men refer to it as a social modality for their lived experiences in Umfundalai. As Afrocentricity, and I quote, "seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics,"<sup>37</sup> maleness as professed by the "Brothers of the Bah Yáh" seems to sit outside of an Afrocentric agenda.

Umfundalai men seem to re-invent conventional masculinities in a space that empowers them to create their own images of maleness. Manifestations of strength and power resonate loudly with Umfundalai's dancing men. Conclusively, I discern that both strength and power are commonalities that link Umfundalai to the social scripts for masculine behavior that predominate the world outside the dance studio. Spirituality through similitude and the "superordinary"<sup>38</sup> experiences

brought on by collective action have congruence in sport which by the "boy code" of American society is posited as dance's antithesis. As the researcher, I challenged myself with the difficult question of so what? If at its core, masculinity stems from the human need to seize strength and power, then how does Umfundalai offer an alternative reality for its dancing men? The answer I discovered for myself points me to agency of the male dancer and the multiplicity of masculine expression that Umfundalai choreography avails.

Scholars like Athena Matua with her progressive Black masculinities that stand up against racism, sexism, and homophobia, and Mark Anthony Neal's *newblackman*, an inclusive masculine archetype that dismantles hegemony for the African American community, ultimately conceive a new gendered existence for African American men, one that is independent of a reliance on Anglo masculine ideology as theorized by Nathan McCall, Tim Edwards, and the like.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>40</sup> This dissertation research reveals, however, the actualization of a liberated gender performativity is more problematic than it is possible. The dancing men in the study feel most masculine when embodying gendered conventions. Yet, even with Mill's *Machismo* and my neo-traditional movement stylization, this study also shows that Umfundalai choreography offers a possible way of being for men in which masculinities as social scripts may be refashioned to accommodate a gendered agency, a maleness.

Umfundalai choreography can house multiple masculinities and provides a fertile ground for seeding new ones, even progressive Black masculinities and *newblackmen*. Peter Castor describes a metaphorical dance between fiction and reality in the interplay of hip hop and prison culture, arguing that hip hop creates the illusion that criminality is a necessary ingredient

<sup>36</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity The Theory of Social Change*, (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Karen E. Bond and Susan W. Stinson, "I Feel like I'm

Going to Take off!': Young People's Experiences of the Superordinary in Dance," *Dance Research Journal* (Winter 2000-2001), 68, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.jtsor.org/stable/1477981>.

<sup>39</sup> Athena Matua, *Progressive Black Masculinities*, 4-6

<sup>40</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man*, 1-30.



for artistic credibility. Consequently, hip hop enthusiasts involve themselves in criminal activity thereby perpetuating the fallacy of the illusion. With Castor's theory as a schema, choreographic works like Kariamuwelsh's *Raaahmonaaah!* and my *Genesis: The Royal Dance of Kings* serve as portals for masculinities that dismantle the hegemony that erodes the community in which it exists. They project masculinities in which strength and power are redefined as the force that dismantles racism, sexism, and homophobia. This force is engineered and individualized by the male dancer. In closing I underscore the significance of self-determination in the construction of maleness with a quote from Bryant Keith Alexander, author of *Performing Black Masculinity race, Culture, and Queer Identity*.

The contemporary Black male agenda is not to unweave the cultural tapestry that tells the story of our history. It is to reconfigure and offer alternate perceptions to those who view the display, and those who blind themselves in the veil of oppression. ... Within this vigorous program of self-identification and determination, the materialization of possibilities is revealed in a nonessentialized fabric of many hues.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*, (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 90.

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