

Sun-Current

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Extra

An African beat reverberates from the basement. Inside, dancers mimic the movements of gazelles, giraffes or other inhabitants of the Serengeti plain, whirling and twirling colorful pieces of fabric called khangas.

The leader, dressed in an orange-and-black tiger leotard, moves among the dancers as they talk, laugh, sing or whoop to the strains of "Mbube" (Wimoweh) and other African songs.

Forty-five minutes later, seven women, still dressed in shiny Lycra, sweat suits or T-shirts and shorts, are sipping herbal tea amid African art in an Edina rec room.

Not your typical aerobics class — this is "aerobics with soul."

Maria Bergh provides tea and friendship and an introduction to African culture in her studio. "Maria's Afro-Workout — Aerobics With Soul" also is available on video and its namesake also conducts aerobics classes at the Uptown YMCA and The Marsh in Minnetonka, and Club Shelard in St. Louis Park.

A native of Tanzania, Maria Nhamu was reared in an orphanage and attended a mission school run by American nuns. A teacher from Onamia, Minn., arranged for her to receive a scholarship to the College of St. Catherine.

After earning a degree in French, she married a Norwegian entrepreneur, Kjell Bergh, and added another language to her linguis-

tic skills. For eight years Maria taught French at Washburn High School and Swahili at Central before it closed.



Maria Nhamu Bergh teaches "Aerobics With Soul" in a studio in her Edina home. She is wearing African apparel call a khanga wrapped around her head/ The half-pound khangas also are twirled by aerobics danders as pomoms or used as weights. (Photos by Linda Cullen)

She maintained her love for the tribal dances she had grown up with and often demonstrated them at area schools.

"I did all the dances at home," she said. "They were such a part of my life, so I found a way of incorporating them into my life (here)."

Bergh had taken aerobics classes in the Twin Cities but found them empty. "I could plan a trip to Iowa or the ingredients for meatloaf (during workouts). I wasn't getting any personal fulfillment."

So she decided to combine aerobics techniques with the artistic balance of dance.

"I have taken the structure of aerobics — the warm up, dance and cool-down — and the creativity and the mood and the attitude and excitement of African dance, and adapted it to aerobics."

"Aerobics With Soul" was the result. "It

really is not mainstream at all," she said. "It's for special people."

The first class was in 1984 and now there are six classes with nine levels that meet in Bergh's home. Cost is \$7 each, or \$24 for four, \$45 for eight, \$60 for 12.

"That includes tea and friendship" said Norma Jurisson, Fridley, during tea after an "Over Easy" class.

"We've gotten to be like family," added Edinan Katie Balek, who was the nurse at Washburn and has known Bergh for 20 years.

Miggs Reimann, Edina, started classes three years ago and "wouldn't miss. It's something I can do. It's less stressful. I feel like I'm so much more limber than I used to be"

Linea Hanson, a flight attendant from Minneapolis, appreciates Bergh's low-key, non-regimented approach.

"I used to go to a private club and I felt you had to be perfect," she said. "I fly 12-to 14-hour flights. Since I started coming to this class I don't have the aches and pains I used to have."

For Mary Johnson, Edina, a member of an advanced class, "It's the best exercise I've ever done in my whole life, and it gives food for thought. Maria is a beautiful girl inside and out and she shares."

Bergh shares her talent with the country that nurtured it. Twice a year she returns to Tanzania to lead tours and conduct workshops. She also visits schools on behalf of Operation Bootstrap, a Minneapolis-based organization that builds primary schools in the rural areas.

"My dances originated there," she said. "I have taken a raw product, refined it and returned it so people don't forget their culture."



After a workout in Maria's studio, class participants relax and visit over tea in the adjoining rec room.