

# AEROBICS WITH SOUL

## Dancing To A Different Drum

Maria Nhamu Bergh's *Aerobics With Soul®* has moved fitness beyond the level of science, incorporating an awareness that speaks plainly to good health and vigor without the industry jargon. Here is a "cardio-cultural" workout and exercise routine that goes straight to the heart and soul of the culture of Africa, a rich and varied landscape.

The third in a trilogy of exercise tapes (the first in the *Aerobics With Soul®* series, *Karibu* won first prize in the high/low impact aerobics category of the 1988 New York Sports magazine competition), *Kilimanjaro*, like its precursors, offers the natural, untamed wonders of Africa as backdrop to the carefully choreographed but free-wheeling movements based on the tribal dances of Bergh's native Tanzania. According to Bergh, *Kilimanjaro*, like the mountain from which it takes its name, is a celebration of the human body, mind and spirit. It represents the range of possibilities that exists for the human mind and body to explore and conquer. "Exercise is more than just physical fitness," she explains. "It is everything. It involves an awareness of yourself, your surroundings and your interrelationships."

A distinctly individual and "very different" workout, *Kilimanjaro* departs from the slew of clones now flooding the consumer market to declare itself a physically and culturally meaningful workout experience. Ozzie Bruno, CEO of Gante International, Inc., which has been promoting Bergh's *Aerobics With Soul®*, describes the product as singularly "stellar and premier in its field." In presenting the first major product for the fledgling 2-year-old marketing enterprise, Bruno capitalized on the crest of a strong Afrocentric wave in con-



**Maria Nhamu Bergh**

sumer buying trends to pull off "quite a coup" in the home shopping market. Beginning some time in the fall, *Aerobics With Soul®* will make its national debut in Spiegel fashion/home furnishing retailer.

Promotional ins and outs notwithstanding, what motivates Bergh is the practicality of the workout. Choreographed outside the metronomic linear beat in four, six and eight count repetitions, *Kilimanjaro* takes on a decidedly different rhythm. It incorporates beats and movements that the commercially tutored "aerobiciser" might find dis-

concerting at first but which will be enthusiastically embraced as the practitioner learns to "loosen up and let the body move to its natural rhythms."

Bergh relies on the natural world to release us from the rigidities of life in a high-stress environment. *Kilimanjaro* is set against the backdrop of Tanzania's Tarangire National Park, and Bergh, a certified instructor and 26-year industry veteran, frequently adopts the natural movements of Africa's wildlife in her routines – whether it is the neck-reaching extensions of the giraffe or the head-burying motions or shoulder moving struts of the ostrich. Combine this image with a routine that offers a twenty second pause between dance sets, with cutaways to the park's wildlife, and you have a formula for stress reduction.

"The pauses are necessary to allow you to catch your breath, switch gears, take control of your body and get ready for the next set," Bergh explains. In fact, the 65-minute workout, designed to challenge the myriad motions that the human body is capable of executing, does require intermittent breaks, as the dances are all physically and rhythmically varied. Bergh encourages participants to "relax, enjoy, play with it, and have fun," as it is only through a relaxed body and an adjusted mind that the movements can be accomplished.

*Kilimanjaro* follows the structure of most exercise routines, with warm-up, aerobics and cool-down sections, but this is where its similarity to the regular production-line tapes begins and ends. *Kilimanjaro* underscores its difference by having a four-part warm-up segment which manages to work every major muscle group, and which doubles as a 20-minute work-

out in itself. What Bergh has choreographed is a finely tuned, self-contained repertoire of movements, which are preceded by and conclude with an abbreviated warm-up and cool-down stretch.

Each module or movement is appropriately titled in Swahili, with an English translation. The first section of the warm-up, titled "U hali gani?" or "How do you feel?," offers immediate encouragement to the health seeker to get in touch with and prime the senses for the upcoming experience. It's all about the totality of the experience" Bergh points out. "It's not about focusing on problem areas and spot training, it's about the flexibility, stamina and strength of the entire cardiovascular system."

In fact, the average Joe or Jane, conditioned to the format of existing workout videos, will find no dedicated "abs" section, because Bergh believes that the answer to spot reduction is not to isolate but incorporate. "A total body conditioning is the key...A big stomach, for example, will not disappear solely because you

do abdominals. It involves more than that. First you have to lose weight, then you have to adopt the right posture and alignment and learn to strengthen the abdominals through constant contraction...It probably has more to do with the vertical position than it does with horizontal exercises..."

*Karibu* (produced in 1987, five years before its follow-up, *Serengeti*, was completed), was a spontaneous response to the regimented programming of the typical aerobics class. "You could plan your day, plan the evening's meal and never miss a step," says Bergh. The lack of originality, effectiveness and "an almost mindlessness" to the much-touted routines led Bergh back to the roots

of her childhood and tribal dances that had been at the center of that culture. The high-paced, sometimes discordant music that accompanied the "power" workouts were as stressful as they were predictable to Bergh, who by then had had her fill of commercial aerobic classes.

The mental and physical conditioning that she sought could have been found in yoga, an inward and outward toning whose overall effect is to promote a total control of body and mind. Realizing that her very own culture was a repository of the same spiritual discipline, Bergh, who now resides in Minneapolis, opted for the rhythms of dances that anchored and defined her East African culture.



"Most people think of African dance only in terms of a highly frenetic pace, with loud, even volatile drumming," Bergh points out. "In other words, it's an expectation and a stereotype nurtured by television and movies...Africa is all that and more...some of our dances are quite slow and graceful...there is a breadth and depth to the dance art of Africa that has yet to be fully explored.

So out of Bergh's Africa has come a pastiche, a performance art of dances to enjoy while working out. "Exercise should be an enjoyable experience, not a competitive sport," she advises. "Too often we take the stresses of our personal and professional lives into the gym with us so that it becomes a continuation of a

struggle and the health-sustaining effect is lost because the tension is not significantly alleviated," she adds.

Marketing analyst, Ozzie Bruno underscores this view by pointing out that in focus groups conducted across the nation, women consistently expressed the desire for a workout program that focused on stress reduction, calling for exercises to relax the stress "buildup" areas such as the neck, shoulders and back. Bergh in turn studied the movements of animals in their natural habitat, mimicking their free and easy movements.

Her decision to film on location in Tanzania was motivated by two factors: her desire to show off her native land and to present a natural

background that would distinguish this exercise video tape from its "staged" studio counterparts. "Having the tape made in Tanzania has completed a life cycle for me...That's where I was born, grew up...learned the dances...and from where I would offer the dances to the world...to learn, love and appreciate..." Bergh exuberates.

Taking the exercise industry to a decidedly new plateau, *Aerobics With Soul® -Kilimanjaro*, has done well on the market overall, with an ever growing sales trend among non-blacks, no doubt buttressed by Bergh's expanding and faithful clientele flocking to the exercise studio in her Edina, Minn. home. But sales trends and accolades notwithstanding, Bergh demurs: "It's all about you, freeing your mind and body and lifting your spirit in song and dance..."

—Brenda E. Campbell

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## Maria Nhambu Bergh: Aerobics With 'Sassy Soul'

Maria Nhambu Bergh has a mission.

"My mission is to bring Africa into the lives of Americans so they can experience, participate and enjoy it," says the native East African fitness instructor.

Bergh spreads her message through the classes she teaches worldwide, her three video workout tapes, and the presentations she makes at events such as Black Expo.

"The challenges never stop," says the mother of two. My challenge is to educate the public about African dance form as a legitimate art."

Bergh's blend of traditional African dance with aerobic exercise has made her stand out within the competitive fitness industry.

Participants in Bergh's workouts sway their hips to native African music. They toss around khanga scarves, part of traditional African dress. They learn to speak a few Swahili words, and mimic the movements of the animals that roam the vast



Serengeti plains.

"*Aerobics With Soul*® is multi-dimensional," says Bergh, who resides in Minneapolis, MN. "Fitness should be a part of who you are and a part of everyday life."

To create her cultural workouts, Bergh draws on the rich heritage of Tanzania, her homeland. She has just completed filming

her third video there, using the country's world famous national park system as a backdrop.

While Bergh says that 80-percent of video sales and most of her class participants are white, she wants blacks to learn about their African culture.

"Africans have been put on the back burner,"

she says. "But our culture is something of beauty and I want it to be taken seriously."

Minnesota might seem an unlikely spot for a transplanted African but Bergh likes everything about the northern city except the brutal winters.

"There are very few people of color in Minneapolis," she notes. "But many people here are very liberal and open."

The cultural workouts that Bergh created and then taught from her Minneapolis home have spread across the United States.

"This past year has been good for me," Bergh says. "The video sales are good and there has been an article about me almost every month."

Sales for Bergh's first video have reached over 75,000 copies. Her recent release, *Aerobics With Soul*®—Serengeti has sold 100,000 copies. But Bergh knows it is an uphill climb against fitness industry giants, such as Beverly Hills aerobic instructor Kathy Smith, who has sold over two million