



# KEEPERS OF HOME

*Muisi-kongo & Kiazzi Malonga*

BY NKEIRUKA ORUCHE

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**“IS THIS MS. MALONGA?** Oh my God. I Love her. I will be in her dance class Saturday.” This is the hairdresser E’s response, during our correspondence in my efforts to book a potential stylist for Muisi-kongo’s hair in preparation for our photoshoot for this issue.

When I share this with Muisi-kongo, even over voice notes, I can feel her squeamishness. Through her “you shouldn’t have told me that,” I can tell that she’s struggling with the challenges of being a person in the public eye.

“You just have to accept that people will see you as royalty, even if you don’t think that’s what you’re trying to do,” I offer her.

I’m always tickled when I get to witness these sides of Ms. Malonga, the one not in class teaching, the one not on stage performing. The side of her that shows she’s not quite sure it’s nice to know that goddesses use the toilet, and have insecurities.

Yet, I totally understand where E is coming from. I too have had many “Omg, is this The Muisi-kongo Malonga?” Even as I’m texting her. Even as we slowly build a friendship and comradeship that’s been a long time coming.

It’s an early Sunday morning, in an East Oakland home. Furniture has been rearranged for the photoshoot with siblings Muisi-kongo and Kiazi, children of the late renowned Malonga Casquelord, and their children Matsoua and Siama. Muisi-kongo barrels in with piles and piles of items, followed by her eight-year old son Matsoua. “Sorry I’m late, you know I had to get all this stuff you asked for.” I nod in response, and carry on with placing outfits on a clothing rack.

**ALTHOUGH KIAZI, WITH HIS EASY-GOING DISPOSITION, AND MUISI-KONGO WITH HER UNDERCOVER HUMOR, ARE CHARMING, THE REAL STARS OF THE SHOW ARE THE CHILDREN.**

Not long after this initial exchange, as she walks back into the room, she pauses mid stride, “Ohhh, I see what you did. You told me a time two hours earlier than the real arrival time. Ah I see you. You already knew who you were dealing with.” This is the kick off to Muisi-kongo’s hilarity throughout the session, as we dress her, oil her up, do her make up, we witness multiple sides of Ms. Malonga, from the sage introspect to the class clown.

As we go through the suitcases and baskets of fabrics and artifacts that Muisi-kongo brought, I’m struck by how much of a keeper she is. An archive of her family and culture. I feel as though I’m witnessing layers and layers of family story, traditions, that one couldn’t begin to unravel in one sitting. I feel lucky to handle her ancestor bottles. Through these it’s apparent that Muisi-kongo is deeply connected, and guided by those rich in cultural traditions, and that she can be that also for her communities.

Kiazi shows up about half an hour later, his daughter Siama in the crook of one arm, and bags of what I can tell are all the items for a toddler on his other arm. “I brought a couple of items that are in the car, do you need me to bring them out?”

I let him know that I need him to first try on the options I’ve selected for him. I have to admit there’s apprehension in my style direction.

“Want me to try this on?... Oh is this vintage?... Alright alright I see you!!”

Buoyed by his first response, I continue. I hand him flowy orange-orange satin trousers, and pointy cheetah print shoes, and whisper ‘Sapeur’ under my breath, hoping to conjure understanding of where I’m going with this.

“Oh is this, what we doing? Alright come on then!”

I relax. My work is going to be easier than I imagined.

Although Kiazi, with his easy-going disposition, and Muisi-kongo with her undercover humor, are charming, the real stars of the show are the children. Siama, a strikingly verbal and fully engaged two-year old with firm boundaries, and an ability to clearly articulate her needs, and Matsoua, a friendly, curious, easy-going, and theatrical 8-year old.

Siama immediately owns the space, and in response, Kiazi is on full papa duty. Making sure to follow through with the details; snacks, activities, ensuring that the furniture doesn’t crash into her. He’s speaking to her in Lari, and she’s responding with understanding.

I crouch down and face her to talk her through the day. “We’re going to do hair, get dressed, and take some photos.” She stares back at me, as though trying to figure out if I’m someone she should trust. Fair enough. To break the ice, I say “alright let’s take a selfie.” This seems to do the trick. “Here’s your dress, your shoes, and your purse.” The purse is the final piece of the puzzle for her to be convinced, and accept me.

“I took the screen away, there are other kids here, he can connect with them instead.” Kiazi mutters to his older sibling. She responds with an almost imperceptible nod. Matsoua, the subject of the commentary, is delightful in front of the camera, hardly needing any prompts to activate exciting poses, and faces.

“I think she’s pooped.” Muisi-kongo picks up her niece and beelines to the bathroom to change her diaper.

And on it goes.



**Pictured: Clockwise: Kiazi Malonga, and Muisi-kongo Malonga; Matsoua and Muisi-kongo; Siama**





L to R: Kiazi Malonga; Muisi-kongo Malonga

Between fitting clothes, acclimating to the bodies in the space, and caring for the children, it takes us a few hours to get rolling. But after a few warm up shots, they begin to loosen up. Things go up a notch when the sounds of Koffi Olomide’s ‘[Efrakata](#)’ coming out of the speakers, hits its climax. The Malongas dip, drop, and sway with the ease and nuance of true children of the soil.

Muisi-kongo Malonga and Kiazi Malonga are the children of [Malonga Casquelourd](#), a world-renowned Congolese dancer, drummer and choreographer who built an exceptional legacy in the traditional arts in the US, and spent half his life activating Congolese culture at the Alice Arts Center ([now named after him](#)), in Oakland, California. Malonga developed a following at an early age as a dancer for Community Fetes, a network of indigenous cultural centers near Brazzaville, in the Congo Republic, where he grew up. He was a principal dancer with the National Congolese Dance Company, toured Africa, Europe and the United States. In 1972 he went to New York, and was a co-founder of Tanawa, the first central African dance company in the US. Malonga moved to Oakland in the mid-1970s, and joined CitiCenter Dance Theater to teach Congolese dance and drum classes. From there, he created his own dance troupe, Fua Dia Congo. In this interview we hear from his first two children.

Muisi-kongo Malonga is a dancer and culture bearer dedicated to preserving culture and cultivating the healing power of African arts traditions. As Artistic Director of [Fua Dia Congo](#), Muisi-kongo continues the pioneering cultural preservation work begun in 1977 by her parents. She founded [BottleTree Culture](#), a grassroots arts organization to reanimate the presence of African cultural arts in her native East Palo Alto. Her current projects include Congo Danced A Nairobi Blues, a site-specific dance-theater production and Lufuki!, an international dance collaboration.

Kiazi, a child protégé of his late father, who performed with his father’s Fua Dia Congo Performing Arts Company from age of 6, became a lead performer, then Musical Director. He currently teaches drumming, and released his debut album, [Tembo Kia Ngoma](#) in March of 2021.

The interview session with Kiazi and Muisi-kongo is mostly a listening session. I’m a co-passenger on a train overhearing close friends talk. I don’t even need to ask leading questions. For the most part, I insert myself to ask qualifying questions, or to expand on something I heard. Like a friend who’s come to visit, sitting with siblings trading jabs at each other, except, this time it’s anecdotes and lessons. Their father Malonga Casquelord is the enduring focal point. He is responsible for world building. He is the keeper

of home. As a friend, I can’t share everything that I’ve heard, but I’m certainly happy to have been invited in.

#### Who makes up the Malonga family?

**MUISI-KONGO:** Our Parents, Malonga Casquelourd; Dr. Faye McNair-Knox; Norma Jean Ishman-Brown; Cynthia Phillips. Their Children, Muisi-kongo Malonga; Kiazi Malonga; Lungusu Malonga; Boueta-Mbongo Malonga, and their Grandchildren: Malonga Matsoua Hemil Koub; Ma’Syiah Malonga-May; Siama Mpandu Malonga; Ynez Nzolani Malonga.

#### On Origin

**KIAZI:** We are Kongo people who originated from [the area that is] modern-day Angola, northern Angola. Kongo dia Ntotela or “The Kongo Kingdom” included Angola, parts of Congo-Brazzaville, and Congo-Kinshasa.

**MUISI-KONGO:** Boko district. Southern part of what is now the Republic of Congo. Before that our origins are in Mbanza Kongo in modern-day Angola. Our names are like a road map. Our dad always said that, you know, he gave us our names so that we wouldn’t get lost. I’m the first. Muisi-kongo, which means ‘one from the Kongo’, then Kiazi is number two, the village that we come from. Lungusu is named after our great-grandfather. And lastly, Boueta-Mbongo is named after a prominent revolutionary figure in Congolese history who fought fiercely against colonialism.

#### On Parents

**KIAZI:** [Our Father] had a whole military background prior to coming to this country. When the Congo got its independence in 1960, he was in his early teens and already very active politically. We have pictures of him with Mao Tse Tung, as part of a delegation of young leaders sent by the Congolese government to China for special training. A lot of those people in the pictures were either killed or are in exile.

**MUISI-KONGO:** He did not get his American citizenship until 2002 (after September 11). I don’t know how interested he was in being an American citizen. I wonder if he was holding on to a dream of returning, but finally accepted that his family, community and life were here.

**KIAZI:** Yeah, he had his green card. But in terms of giving up the Congolese passport, he wasn’t. He was real ‘African Bushman’ \*chuckle\*.



L-R: Matsoua, Muisi-kongo, Kiazi Malonga, and Siama





**MUISI-KONGO:** My mom is Dr. Faye McNair-Knox. Her mother, Sarah Lee Williams McNair was from Augusta, GA and her father, Rev. Elisha Bonaparte McNair was from Bassfield, Mississippi. I think both of our moms' families have roots in Mississippi before migrating West. My mom was a preacher's kid. She was a brilliant scholar who studied and taught at Stanford, a super revolutionary, Pan-Africanist. We attended African-centered schools and grew up in the same CME church she grew up in,

to our family and had a common language to communicate with. My mom was a military brat similar to our dad. Okay. Our dad's father was part of an African infantry unit known as 'Les tirailleurs Sénégalais' in World War II. I lived in a few different places. My mom was a scholar...a college professor and linguist, but she kept up the pattern of frequent movement from her upbringing in a military family throughout her academic career. A couple of years in Virginia, in Miami, in New Jersey. I was with her for some

where she served as musical director. We attended family reunions every two years and she was the director for the big family choir. My mom passed on September 12, 2018.

**KIAZI:** My mother is Norma Jean Ishman-Brown. She was one of three, all girls. She was a middle child, and the only one that had children. She was an engineer who graduated from Stanford with a degree in Human Biology. The only connection I had to her side were her two sisters and her parents. My grandfather is from Mississippi, and my grandmother, Texas, Arkansas. They moved to Southern California, then Vegas, then back to Southern California. I was pretty close to that side of the family until my mom passed on November 21, 1998.

#### On Growing Up

**KIAZI:** [I grew up in] East Palo Alto. We have different moms, and spent weekends and vacations [together]. We have a very intricate family web. We took trips together. We have a lot of the same memories and experiences even though it wasn't a 24/7 situation.

**MUISI-KONGO:** I grew up between East Palo Alto and Oakland. I have two older sisters, Halili and RaShida from my mom's first marriage. I spent a couple of years, from [age] 7 to 9 in France living with our dad's younger sister. A strategy to make sure we were linked

of that. Other times, I would come back to Oakland to live with our dad. Even though we were splitting our time between our moms' households and his, it's not disjointed in my mind.

**KIAZI:** We used to call on the phone, and after the first six months, she had a French accent. It was hella funny.

**MUISI-KONGO:** People!! Immersion! I grew up doing a lot of musical stuff. My mom, my two older sisters, and I would perform during Kwanzaa, songs by Sweet Honey in the Rock and other revolutionary Black things. I spent a lot of that time lip syncing because it was terrifying to be up there singing. People still come up to me, making fun of me about lip syncing.

**KIAZI:** I lived with my mom, and my two younger sisters. I have another younger sister from my mother's marriage. We lived in East Menlo Park. I played a lot of basketball.

### THE MOVEMENT AND THE ENERGY AROUND WHAT WE WERE DOING, WHAT WE GREW UP IN, WAS SO STRONG THAT OUR FRIENDS ENDED UP BECOMING A PART OF WHAT WE WERE DOING.

I performed with Pops. But, he would always make sure that the arts weren't impacting school. My mother passed at 16, then I moved up to Oakland full time and was commuting (to school), until I graduated.

#### On life with Malonga

**MUISI-KONGO:** A message we always heard from my father is, there's no such thing as a half sibling. There's no confusion around the fact that we're siblings. We grew up in different households partially as an extension of each other. But in the mind, he's not my half brother because that's not a thing. That's not how we grew up. That's not like the mindset that we were given.

**KIAZI:** Pops used to have us at the [Diata Diata] rehearsals on Sundays. I'm like, dude, can I just go home? When I was younger, I used to hate to be the token African boy that would drum at Black History Month in school. I'm trying to play ball, you know? As I got older, reflecting on the fact that I come from parents who saw the importance of being rooted in art. Pops would always tell us to always master and learn your art because it will take you places and put you in rooms with people who otherwise you wouldn't be connected with, and if you need them, you have a plethora of a community that you can lean into.

**MUISI-KONGO:** Our dad cooked a lot. People are always coming over. People were always living with us. We'd

get home from rehearsal and people would come over and we had dinner at like midnight. You'd go to bed, get woken up at 1:00 in the morning to get up and come eat because rehearsal ended at 11.

**KIAZI:** Let me jump in right here. So they get woken up to eat but I got woken up to make the fufu before y'all got there.

**MUISI-KONGO:** The dance was the central activity, really. But community was also an activity. We do this thing together, and it creates this energy beyond the dance and drumming. It wasn't always people that were involved in the dance. He was a magnet for people in general.

**KIAZI:** He was super good at building people. I didn't get this from him because sometimes I get tired of being around people, but he never did. Our house was open. Just community always. He was super instrumental in building a community based in that culture and bringing a lot of artists to grow the culture here, even people who were not Congolese, who were not artists, he [got] them involved, to learn something in the arts, to be able to increase how the art was being presented. We have several aunts and

uncles who were teachers, dancers, drummers, singers, artists, musicians. A number of people outside of him and our greater family circle who were involved in arts and influence and guide our artistic journey.

**MUISI-KONGO:** The movement and the energy around what we were doing, what we grew up in, was so strong that our friends ended up becoming a part of what we were doing. The friends that we grew up with, became family and were also involved in the art form. That avenue served multiple purposes. I probably started actually liking dance for myself around 12, where it no longer felt like a chore. You couldn't just not participate. When I didn't want to dance, I drummed a little bit with Diata Diata. But it was clear, I had to do something. [My father] would push but with limits. You weren't just gonna sit with your arms folded and not be a part of what was happening. When he started the youth company, Ballet Kizingu, and got our peers involved, that's when I felt myself blossom. I had spent most of my apprenticeship learning alongside adults. When we got together with our peers, that unlocked the joy.

#### On Going to the Congo

**MUISI-KONGO:** 1988. [We were] very excited.

**KIAZI:** We definitely were. Lungusu cried for a good period of time. Boueta wasn't born yet. Muisi and I just



hung out on the plane and acted like we were getting drunk off of soda. Fall asleep, wake up, order all-you-can-drink soda. Up until that point, and even after, people would communicate via letter but Pops would buy the boom boxes and sit down and talk and have us tell messages to our grandparents and all of the family there. They would do the same. He would send those tapes. Kind of like long voice notes. So coming into that trip, even though I was six, she was seven, we had a really good sense of who our family was. We had a lot of stories about our grandparents and uncles. When we saw people, it was like, “remember this story?” That’s him. Remember this one? Boom, that’s him. The one who got the whoopin’ when he was 40. That’s him.

**KIAZI:** [The next time I went was] 2006. I would have gone earlier. I was pushing him to go. When our grandfather passed in 2001, I was pushing to go and he was like, no, stay in school. Then I got into an overseas program in Tanzania. All right, I got my money. I’m going to Congo after. I’m buying my ticket. If you want to come

**MY HEART IS IN CONGO. IT’S WHERE I IDENTIFY, WHERE I FEEL AS A PERSON, MY HEALING, MY GROWTH THE WAY I LOOK AT SPIRITUALITY IS THROUGH THAT LENS.**

with me, you can come. Fast forward, the accident happened. We all didn’t actually make it back as a collective until 2006.

**MUISI-KONGO:** He went in ‘83, in ‘88. He went to bury our grandfather in 2001. He wasn’t able to go when our grandmother passed in ‘98.

**KIAZI:** There was a civil war.

**On Cultural Identity & Connection**

**KIAZI:** I got a lot of questions around being of African descent here in America. You might come to school in something that’s a little different, an African print shirt. So I got teased a lot at first. In third grade I went to public school and [kids] made a story up about me being a young African boy prodigy who would go around the world giving speeches.

**MUISI-KONGO:** There were a lot of different ways that he tried to connect us to our actual family in addition to how the arts connected us to the fact that we were from Congo and that was ingrained.

**KIAZI:** My heart is in Congo. It’s where I identify, where I feel as a person, my healing, my growth, the way I look at spirituality is through that lens. I’m pretty solid on

who I am in my Congolese identity. Knowing the arts and the culture helps me understand myself and my people better. This is who I am. This is where my family is from. This is why things are this way. You can look at yourself and understand your journey a little bit better.

**MUISI-KONGO:** Traditional music and dance. Yeah, it’s a ritual, it’s an activity, it’s a skill. Most of all, it’s a portal. We can get into the politics of do you have to be born somewhere, to be ‘of’ somewhere? I wasn’t born in the Congo, but what’s very real is blood memory. What’s very real is that these are spiritual practices. So you absolutely tap into an ancient knowing that connects you to God and spirit and to all those who came before. I absolutely believe that being a practitioner of these traditions gives you that gateway that you can plug into at any given point. I’m very much a Congolese African American. Yet, all roads lead back to the same place. I was born and raised in the U.S. I’m deeply rooted. I’m connected. And I have different ways that I can tap into that connection. The dance is a very potent way where

I can have this direct conversation, not contingent upon birthplace but rather birthright.

**KIAZI:** Not everybody from back home is super duper into traditional

beliefs, or the traditional art forms. A lot of folks will even be so much more into Western ways, whether it’s worship music to the point where they know shit about stuff that’s going on here that you don’t even know because you’re just like, I’m not following it like that. I think being outside of the country is definitely a way to stay connected. It’s easy to lose your identity in a place where it’s like putting a drop of sugar in a huge thing of coffee. You won’t taste the sweetness. If you don’t hold on to the little you got you can get lost in the sauce.

**On life ‘after’ Malonga. Hopes, Dreams, Regrets**

**KIAZI:** Pops was the glue that connected everybody. With his transition shit shifts. We are evolving and finding new ways to connect as we grow. With me being a new dad, and Muisi with Matsoua, we’re connecting on parenting. We are seeing each other as adults, siblings, artists and parents. The artistic connection is always there. But as we walk into this new phase of our lives, there are new branches growing on this tree and we have to be mindful of how to tend them together.

**MUISI-KONGO:** The hope is always to be able to pass these traditions on. Trying to balance the roles of parent and cultural caretaker, amongst other things, makes me reflect on how effective our dad was in everything that he was holding.

**KIAZI:** For Siama, I follow Pop’s perspective. I want her to find something that she’s super passionate about from an academic standpoint and then dedicate her life to that. She already likes to dance, so hopefully I’m jumpstarting and continue to pour into that. I wanted to be able to look at my daughter and be like, yeah, she’s doing her thing. I want to give them the gift of knowledge of self and culture.

**MUISI-KONGO:** My desire at this stage is to center our efforts in passing the torch to our replacements. For my own son, nieces, nephews, and our community children. I want to see with my own eyes these traditions in the hands of those trusted and trained to carry them forward. I want to see the impact they will have on the world.

**KIAZI:** I try not to regret. I like to think before I move. But, people passing, you can’t really control that. So there’s a sense of dang, I wish they could be here because, this little one, she’s pretty groovy.

**MUISI-KONGO:** I really wish my parents were here to see their extension. I would’ve loved to witness their relationships with their grandchildren as they grow. My mom passed away when Matsoua was about 4. I keep his memory of her fresh by talking about her often. I also tell him stories about his Nka nka (grandpa). There will always be a longing for their physical presence, but they are present in other ways.

**On Home**

**KIAZI:** Congo for me is home because Pops raised us always saying, this is not your home. You have a huge family. We have land. Referencing this far off place that he eventually took us. Our mamas were African American and they found home in the culture. That’s why I can identify with Congo being home.

**MUISI-KONGO:** Home for me is in my body first. Wherever I go, I am already there. Home is also where my Ancestors have put down roots... East Palo Alto, Oakland, Bassfield, Augusta and the Congo.

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She is a 2022 Dance/USA Artist Fellow, a Kikwetu Honors Awardee, a 2018 NYFA Immigrant Artist Fellow, YBCA 100 Honoree, and recipient of awards from Creative Work Fund, MAP Fund, New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project, Kenneth Rainin Foundation, California Arts Council, among others.