

PART ONE
Kulu Mele's



Celebrating 50 Years
(1969–2019)

**Past, present & future from
Dorothy & John Wilkie
& 50+ contributors**

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The stairway to the basement, filled with ancestors and memories: part of Wilk's archives. Photo: Ife Nii-Owoo, 2018. Inset: Wilk and Dottie demonstrate social dance at ODUNDE's Huckleback to Hip-Hop cabaret. Photos: Thomas B. Morton, 1994.

Carrying the torch for culture

Dorothy and John Wilkie remember 50 years of Kulu Mele

“Carrying the torch” shares Kulu Mele history as told by Dottie and Wilk, partners in dance, culture and life for nearly sixty years. John Wilkie is Kulu Mele’s historian and cultural archivist. His documentation and study, like music, is lifelong endeavor, temporal framework: the spine of the story. Dottie is Oshun in the story: motivating force. A panoramic view of Kulu Mele’s history, their tellings center big moments of learning, transformative practice (and people). They show collective self-determination, and the long-haul persistence and labors of love that sustain and power peoples’ deep cultural movement building.

Of course, this leaves a lot untold¹

Aidan Un: What kind of work were you doing?

Baba John Wilkie (Wilk): Oh, what work didn’t I do!

I worked on the railroad. I worked in the factories.

I did all kind of work. I even worked with the bail bondsmen, getting people out of jail. I worked at the Budd Company making car parts. That was a good job—paid good. Some of them didn’t pay good. I worked at a clothing factory where they made pants and shirts. Made suits. I was pressing clothes. Ironing clothes. I worked in a sweater factory. A cardboard factory. I worked in all kind of jobs. I stayed with the

¹ Epic and episodic in style, touching on Kulu Mele’s 50 years of significant achievement, this section draws from six audio recorded interviews (2015-2019) with Dottie and John Wilkie. “It was nice to visit the past with you,” Dottie said, after one of these sessions, when memory filled the room. Transcripts from Aidan Un’s video recordings caught the last year and project unfolding. Additional conversations and phone calls helped amplify or clarify understandings, as did a large brown-paper timeline rolled out at meetings and events this year: a visual representation of emerging collective history. Kulu Mele and community members interacted with and commented upon the overall timetable, helping to place events in time and significance. My job here is scribe and editor. Honoring free Black traditions, Philadelphia African American movement culture, keeping my ears and heart tuned to frequencies and rhythms shaped in North Philadelphia and globally, I aim to render peoples’ voices, oral tradition, call and response, as given. Brackets mark editorial presence. Glossary, names list, graphics—artifacts of the process—are rough tools. “Additional sources” shares some frames of reference

Red Cross for 24 years, setting up blood runs. Going different places taking blood. But that was the last thing I did was the Red Cross. Before that I had all kind of jobs. **Music was my sanity.** I could go and do all kind of work that I didn’t like, but when I come home and play music—I was good. **That helped me get through life.**²

Debora Kodish: What do you think people will say if we ask them: “What is Kulu Mele to you?”

Mama Dorothy Wilkie (Dottie): Well, I think people know that we help **hold the culture.** Kulu Mele is one of the groups that **passed the torch** [for culture.] You know, just like Arthur made a legacy here. And I think Kulu Mele made one here and is still making

² John Wilkie did many kinds of work to pay the bills. Labors of love—unpaid, free, gifts of time and heart—still make Kulu Mele what it is, after 50 years. This alternative off-the-books economy (coupled with gig / precarious labor) makes it a huge challenge for next generation people to realize futures in dance and drum. But living this gift economy is a world of independence and self-determination. Karen Warrington (part of this movement, in Arthur Hall’s company) said, “I see a freedom that’s beyond anything politics or society can put on us. Where would you be if you weren’t part of this?” Dottie and Wilk’s framing comments offer perspective and grounding. Orientation to what follows. “Carrying the torch.” Dottie’s metaphors place her and Wilk amid community efforts: work to reclaim, regenerate, and reimagine cultural practices that are sustaining and powerful. See Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, Brown, “Orisa Paradigm” and “Codification of Soul,” Dalili, *More Than A Sisterhood*, and Metzger, *Life in the Banyan Branches*, on embodied wisdom, and the work of movement ritual.

one here. And so some people might say that. They know us like that. That we kept the culture going. And it's not a lot of us. It's not a lot of us that's doing that. We sacrificed our life to the culture. And it's just like you just live it. **You be living the culture.** So that's what you be doing. It's a separate part of life. We still go out to clubs— Or we used to go out to clubs! That's another part, right! And church. That's another part.

Wilk: The young people have their culture. We just letting 'em know, this is part of your culture, too.

It all started with social dancing

Dottie: So it all started with social dancing.³ For me. I just loved to dance. From a little girl really. I used to do the hucklebuck for the family when they had family gatherings. They used to call me and say "Come on, Dottie. Come on down here and do the hucklebuck." Vaux Junior High School, that's where both of us went. They had social after-school dances and lunchtime dances. And I tried to make 'em all. Every Friday. [We didn't meet in school though]. I saw him in a dance. I went to a dance with some friends across the street from where he lived at. And I saw him dancing, and I said, "Who is that?" I said, "I want to meet him!" He wouldn't look at me. I said, "I wish he would ask me to dance!"

Wilk: But y'all were young, right?

Dottie: I was a teenager. (He's three years older than me). But a friend of mine knew who he was. She said, "Oh, I know him. His name is Wilk." I said, "Oh, I

³ Dottie named herself ("I'm going to be a dancer") and choreographed to acclaim from youth. She describes in other episodes how she learned: picking up a technique from everyone she encountered, finding and making openings, paying attention. ("You learn quick," James Marshall told her and recruited her for Jaasu Ballet). Dottie and Wilk are widely known as social dancers. They have been dancing together since 1961: nearly 60 years. For their recollections, and those of other local African American dancers, see Roberts, *Hucklebuck to Hip-Hop* and Michael, "I don't ever remember a time when we didn't dance." For a larger framework, see Hazzard, *Jookin'*.

gotta meet him!" Because of how he was dancing. And plus he looked good! I said, "He looks like a warrior, too. Like he won't take no stuff." And she knew him. And she set it up for me to meet him. And I met him one day. Met him on the corner.

Wilk: It was in Green's Restaurant.

Dottie: It was outside of Green's Restaurant. You had came out of there with some ice cream. It was on the corner of 20th Street and Cecil B. Moore Avenue. Columbia [Avenue, then]. And she introduced us. And then he asked me if I wanted to come around his house for some ice cream and I said, "No!" [Laughing!] Not yet! And the rest is history!

Wilk: 'Cause Ruth was telling me, "I got somebody that can squirrel you!" That's how they—

Dottie: That can beat you dancing!

Wilk: She says, "I got somebody, I want you to meet her." Because Ruth couldn't out dance me.

Dottie: No, and I couldn't either, really. No. He was top shelf!

Wilk: I had a rep for dancing, back in the day. When I was younger. Yeah. But after that, me and Dottie'd draw crowds.

Dottie: Yeah.

Wilk: When we was dancing, they'd crowd around you. Yep.

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Wilk: We was already doing the cha-cha in school, in Vaux. There wasn't no drums. We was doing it to rhythm and blues. Certain songs in rhythm and blues was cha-cha. We had our little cha-cha. It wasn't as intense as the actual Latin cha-cha but it was close! When I was young and I'm sloppin' and boppin' and strandin'—that was my culture. But when the guys started playing drums on my block, I was drawn to it. Not everybody was, you know. [People] appreciated it. But **I was drawn to it and stuck with it**, and then later I met Bobby Crowder and all them. Then tried to learn that. But we already had what we called our

culture, you know. You know, dancing, what they call line dancing, we used to call the continental.

Dottie: Right. We was doing merengue too. And the mambo.

Wilk: Because back in those days they played music with the drums in it, in school. Because Bob used to play with the Flames. [With] Chris Powell. That group. And they used to play that in Vaux. And we used to dance the mambo to it. Joe Loco [was another one]. All that stuff. They used to be in school. Joe Loco, he had this recording called, “Gee.” Remember that record? He put a rhythm and blues record to Latin. And we used to dance in school. But after a while they took all that out. By the time my son went to Vaux, that was all gone. None of that. When I first heard the Latin rhythms was on a radio show called Mambo Mania that used to come on the radio. Now, I was in my room and when it came on, it like drove me crazy because I didn’t know how to dance to it! You know, when I first heard that music, I said, “**Wow. I like this music but I don’t know how to dance to it.**” So that was really the start. But then I heard Powell and them playing, and I said, “Oh, here we go!”

The call of the drums

Wilk: Powell lived around the corner from me. And they come up and Joe [Bolden] lived up the street from me. And they was all tight. They were older than me. But they’d bring their drums around and sit on Turner Street and start playing.⁴

⁴ Wilk describes restrictions on free Black sound and movement: a dimension of the historic policing and repression of Black bodies that he and others resisted. He also describes the mentoring of older musicians. In this context, significant Black and Brown arts and cultural workers created alternatives. See Warrington, “Cultural Incubation.” Others made Philadelphia public schools and rec centers sites of independent Black arts education. Beginning in the late 1960s, Arthur Hall, Baba Crowder and others taught African dance and drum at Lee Cultural Center. Kulu Mele rehearsed there through the 1990s. Hall’s Ile lfe was an innovative arts and cultural development program in North Philadelphia 1969-1988. In the 1970s, tap dancers Libby Spencer and Edith “Baby Edwards” Hunt taught in city rec centers because of producer-director-choreographer-dancer Hortense Allen

Dottie: And these was conga drums.

Wilk: Yeah, congas. No djembes. No batás.

None of that.

Dottie: None of that.

Wilk: So the first drum I started playing was bongos.

And I seen Powell, he had these big long bongos—the heads real big but the bottoms little. And they used to sit on the steps and play. You know until somebody’d chase ‘em. Stop ‘em. Then they started playing on the roof. You know, up around where Powell lived? They would play up on the secondary roof. They’d be sitting up there playing! I was done after that! **I started following them around then.**

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Wilk: My father’s friend, Mr. Tommy, gave me a bongo. One. Not two. Because he saw me around there, beating on hominy grit boxes and stuff. So he said, “That boy want to play.” So Tommy gave me this drum. I would sit in the yard and beat on it. Well, when I was young, William Powell and Charles Brown, they lived around my neighborhood. They lived on Nicholas Street, I lived around the corner. But they played drums. They were older than me. And Powell heard me back there. So one day he came back in the yard and he said, “Let me hold your drum for a minute.” He took the drum and took the skin off my drum and put it on his. I said, “OK, you got that one, but now you got me for life!” You know! So, I followed him around and followed him around. And

Jordan, whose husband, Ted, ran City of Philadelphia Department of Recreation programs (1972-1980). African American visual artists found teaching and mentoring in schools, in part thanks to Assistant Superintendent Allan R. Freelon. These African-centered interventions (and histories) continue to be relevant and useful. Kulu Mele is remarkable as a 50-year old community-based culturally-grounded teaching-learning practice that has endured past the lifespans of many other community education and development efforts. For larger contexts of Black community-centered education, see Countryman, *Up South*; Rickford, *We Are An African People*; and *We Speak: Black Artists in Philadelphia*; Moses, *Radical Equations*; Dyson, *The Black Panther Party and Transformative Pedagogy*; and McGregory’s entries in *Philadelphia Folklife Resources*. For the call of the drums and some history of Philadelphia’s African percussion traditions, see McGregory, “The Drum Preferred.”

they had the Northwest Club up there. On 23rd Street. You probably never been in there, because I had to carry a drum and look old to get in there. You know, when Powell and them playing in there. I used to follow them around. They had live entertainment at the Bamboo. On Ridge.

Dottie: They had live entertainment all up and down Columbia Avenue until the riot came.

Wilk: I'm talking where like Bob and all them used to play. I didn't meet Bob [right away]. I used to hear about him. Because I think Powell was one of his first students. And **they used to talk about Bob**. And then Powell took me to one of the lessons. He took me to Bob's house when Bob was living right off of Lehigh Avenue. It was Hicks Street or something. And we all went in there and it was the first time I seen what they called a bohemian crib. A real beatnik house. Stuff in crates. But it was all nice and neat. It was decked out. And Bob took Powell in another room, and they'd practice. And he'd get his lesson. And I set in there and listened. So that's how. They was playing congas. **That was the first time that I met [Robert Crowder]**. I was a teenager.⁵

Wilk: [Powell] was the first one that I seen saw playing. Him and Charles. They used to have a group. And Powell crossed over to play with the Puerto Ricans. The Latin community. Powell went to the Navy and all that. He came back and he started the group, Afro-American Drummers. He got this group together with instruments. With timbales, bass,

⁵ Born in 1941, John Wilkie was a young teenager in the 1950s when North Philly was a cultural epicenter; he remembers the sequence of drums that came to Philadelphia and how it happened. For recollections of local African drum and dance histories, see "Honoring Ancestors" and other projects preserved in the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) archives. PFP's *Works in Progress* magazine (1987-2014) includes many community testimonies about deep cultural movement building in Philadelphia in Black and brown and adjacent communities. Nzinga Metzger and Benita Brown, scholars and former Kulu Mele dancers, also provide framework and context, in their writing with PFP and independently.

guitar. It was Powell and Charles and Dickey and the bass player Dottie went to school with. Me and Dottie was living in the projects. Because we used to go over to see them at Gay Paree. When they formed the group Afro American Drummers, it was just all drummers: Marshall Bird. Albino Sam. Charles. Powell.

Dottie: I think that was in the late 1960s.

Wilk: Yeah. It could have been. Because when they had just the drummers, that's when they used to rehearse over on top of the Webb. And that's when Margaret and them used to come and dance with them. They had a little dance troupe and they just had all drummers.

Powell had rehearsals at the Webb Bar, on 20th and Cecil B. Moore. And they used to drum in the bar. They had a platform from the shelf to the bar and Powell and them would sit up there and play. I'd sneak in there and when they'd see me, they'd throw me out. I was too young! And then Powell and them would have rehearsals upstairs.

You know, I had to beg to get up there! Powell was strict. He had closed rehearsals. He got that from Saka. We went all the way down 15th and Girard when Saka and them came here in the 50s and tried to get into rehearsal. And they cracked the door: [Mimes looking through a door, nodding "no"]. They wouldn't let us get in there. And I wanted to get in there so bad! 'Cause all of them was in there. They was practicing. So Powell used to do that at the Webb. He wouldn't let too many people in there. He let me up sometimes. But I remember Horace and all of them trying to come up there. You know, those young boys and jitterbugs. He wouldn't let them come up there.

Wilk: We was playing mambo and cha-chas and rhumbas. And they had Haitian rhythms they used to play. Bongos and timbales. That's what was going on. I loved the rhythm! **I heard the rhythm and I was drawn to it.** Everybody's not drawn to it.

Dottie: Exactly.

Wilk: Everybody not drawn to it. I mean everybody liked it around the way, but not everybody didn't want to play it like I did. There was a lot of us, but it was only a few of us that was really attracted to it and followed it around. I used to carry their drums. Stuff like that. Sneak into clubs where they were playing at. You know. Carry their drums trying to look older!

Dottie: That would get you in places, if you carried the drums.

Wilk: And they used to play around at the PAL.⁶ Herb Dungee used to have it upstairs. He was a dancer and one of the teachers up there.

Dottie: And that's where I came in at. It was in the early '50s, I was walking down the Avenue. Columbia Avenue past the PAL and **I heard the drums and it had me!** I said, "That sound good! Where is that coming from?" It drew me in the building. They was boxing downstairs. And I went upstairs. I didn't know nobody in there. And [upstairs] you know, it was a big wide long open floor, with guys drumming on one side and people was dancing down the floor. And I said, "Wow, this is nice! I like this!" I stood by the wall a long time listening to them and watching them dance. And I asked them afterwards, "How could I get in that?" And they said, "Yeah, well you come back and you can train with us." So, I couldn't wait. I was dreaming about it. And the next time I went, they let me get in and I was going down the floor. And **that just filled me up.** That just gave me such joy

⁶ The PAL (the Police Athletic League) ran the community center Dottie and Wilk frequented. The Philadelphia Police Department started PAL in 1947 in postwar North Philadelphia: 20 centers offering programs for young people in the neighborhood.

to have constructive dancing and to be with a group and to be with drummers. And a lot of people in there was older than me. I was very, very young. But I said, "This is what I really, really like." I stayed with them a long time.

Wilk: I was up there.

Dottie: I didn't know him then.

Wilk: I was. I was up there with Powell and Charles and Albino Sam.

Dottie: Herb Dungee is who I remember, and Margaret that was teaching up there. They would make up some dances. That was African dance to me because it was something different that I hadn't seen. But I know that they called it interpretive dancing.⁷ And I used to study with them and then they would perform at some recreation centers. One time I went to the rec center on 25th and Master and performed with them. It was different than like you and your partner dance when you do social dance. This was like the whole group studied a dance and do it. That drew me to the dancing. And I liked the drumming that went with it. So I followed them around dancing for awhile until that dispersed. That was in the 50s. I was a teenager. And then later on in life, the drumming and stuff, I heard the music and I always used to make up dances. From that class, from learning from them, I used to make up dances. And **I used to tell people, "I'm going to be a dancer! I'm going to be a dancer!"** But I wasn't thinking about no ballet or no modern dancing. I was thinking about African dance. But later on, I met him and—

Wilk: But we didn't meet from the African dances. We met in [a] social setting, social dancing. At that rec center.

Dottie: The rec on 25th Street. That was like my home.

⁷ Skilled drummers played for interpretive dance classes (learning from one another). Performers also got work filling the interpretive or African number in touring shows and at cabarets. See Warrington, "Cultural Incubation" and Dixon, *Marian Cuyjet*.

That's where I stayed all the time.

Wilk: Yeah, I went up to the rec. 'Cause me and Powell went—

Dottie: I might have even been in a show with you or something.

Wilk: We used to walk up to the rec. And he used to teach me these songs [to Shango]. You know, we would be singing these songs going to the rec.

Dottie: That's deep.

That was the start of it here in Philly

Wilk: Saka Acquaye he was an artist from Ghana. And he came here and put a group together. That was the first African music that I heard.

Dottie: And he taught Bob. Saka Acquaye started a lot of stuff. Because Arthur Hall and Miss Nash and Robert Crowder all studied under Saka Acquaye.⁸

Wilk: They was all in that group.

Dottie: And then they took different roads and started [their own] stuff.

Wilk: Sonny Morgan, Bobby Crowder and Garvin Masseaux. That was the start of it, here in Philly. They the ones that made that group. 'Cause Garvin played xylophones. They played instruments. All those xylophones you hear on that Gold Coast Saturday Night album, that was Garvin. Sonny moved to New York. Garvin went to California. But Bob stayed and taught. That was the beginning.

Dottie: So yeah. Saka started a whole lot here. He's the core of a lot of where we are now.

Wilk: Yeah. He's the beginning.

"Bob's stuff is bush stuff"

Wilk: And then when I first seen Kulu Mele, it was Bobby Crowder, Garvin Masseaux, George Cannon and they had instruments. They had a bass. And Bob was playing a guitar. And they had Saudah and Penny and somebody else [dancing].⁹ The first time I saw them was at Broad and Diamond. And they had bells around their waists and ankles. I said, "That's what I like." They had it hooked up, too. I mean it was hooked up. And me and Truck were trying to figure it out. Wow! They was playing this music [and it] was beautiful. So when you asked me, say "I want to dance," I said, "That's where I'll take you." I said, "I like this company."

Dottie: I said, "I'm going to go check out Arthur." You know, because I had seen him. So we were going together. I told him, "I'm ready to go to his group. I want to get into stuff like that."

Wilk: Arthur had it set up. He was a genius. He had everything set up. He had people come in from different places, to teach you different authentic stuff and everything. Bob and them was crude. But that's where I wanted to go.

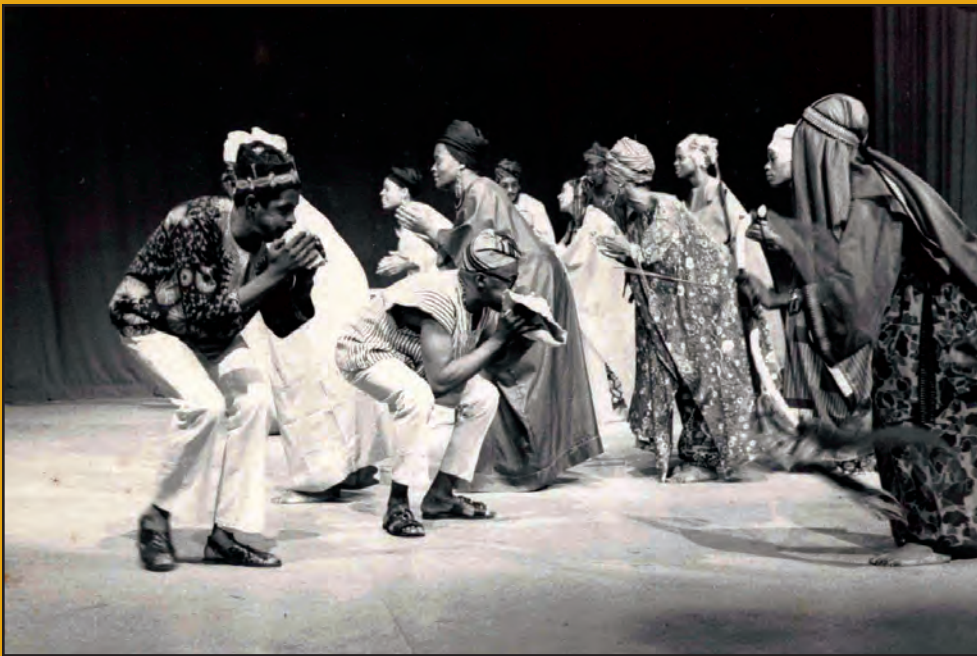
Dottie: Right and he took me to one of Bob's rehearsals. And I took class. And one thing just led to another. I became one of the dancers. Ms. Nash used to come through there. Ishangi family. They came through there. A lot of people used to come through there.

⁹ About ten years after Saka left town, around 1968, Baba was evolving new paths. Wilk and Doc Gibbs remember seeing Crowder in an electrifying performance on a pandeiro at a jazz gig with saxophonist Sonny Fortune at a club, Last Way Out, at 22nd and Walnut around 1967. Wil Letman (an alumni of Saka's group) remembers that in the early days, he and Baba (both playing pandeiro) performed as Kulu Mele, with Saudah and Penny dancing. Before (and while) forming Kulu Mele, Baba Crowder played jazz, taught dance, and drummed for interpretive classes and gigs. Baba was in at the start of a lot of generative cultural interaction.

⁸ Saka recruited them from Judimar School of Dance. See Dalilli, *More Than a Sisterhood*, 42-68



Garvin Masseaux, Baba, Dottie, and a student from one of Dottie's classes, Lee Cultural Center, c. 1970s. Photo courtesy John Wilkie



Top: Wilk and Baba with conch shells. Kulu Mele mask dance, Channel 12, 1970s. Middle: Kenny, Peache, Truck, Baba & Wilk performing at the Art Museum, c. 1970s. Bottom: Mona, Dottie, Evelyn Smart, Saudah, Par, c. 1970s. Photos courtesy John Wilkie.

Wilk: Started in '71, we started going there. Was Penny and Saudah and me and Bob. And other people would come but they would not stay. They'd come through. And the same people wouldn't come all the time.

Dottie: They'd be there for a while and then—

Wilk: They'd go.

Dottie: We'd do a performance once and awhile with him, and then a new group comes.

Wilk: Yeah. Bob was rough. He did not play! He was a stern teacher. But a good teacher.

Dottie: Bob liked Wilk.

Wilk: I would go home and study hard, 'cause I didn't want him hollering at me! I would study hard.

Dottie: And I was just like thirsty for the dance and just wanted to learn and be part of that kind of culture. It was another part of my life. Outside of my social life and everything. That was a big part.

Wilk: I remember Penny, she taught you a lot.

Dottie: Yeah. Penny did.

Wilk: But then she left.

Dottie: But we stayed. And we kept studying. We wasn't even getting that much work, at all. Bob would keep creating dances.¹⁰ That went on for years before I started anything. People would come in the company, I would teach [them] what Bob taught me.

Wilk: He did a lot of stuff from the CD, *Gold Coast Saturday Night*. Jungle rhythms. There wasn't too much highlife, because you needed instruments. But we did "Kwame Nkrumah." That's where I learned that song. That was the kind of stuff we would do.

Dottie: We never did no highlife dancing. Saka did a lot of highlife stuff. [Bob] made up dances.

Wilk: Because Bob used to dance and he was teaching

¹⁰ Doc Gibbs recalls of Baba that "When he started Kulu Mele, he showed Saudah [Bey, his partner, and a dancer in the group], what the steps should be. Even though Bob was a drummer, he was also a dancer. Ironically, he used to live around the corner from me. I didn't know him. He was 20 years older than me. A woman who was a second mother to me knew him and talked about him as a very good dancer."

African dance at Temple University and I was his drummer! Had a card and everything! Me and Dottie we were living in the projects, and I used to take my staff card and go swimming!

Dottie: I don't know what Bob learned from Saka and what he made up. I came here to Kulu Mele blank. He was doing all kind of stuff. Peache used to say, "Bob's stuff is bush stuff!" "More like what they do in the village." "It's raw."

Wilk: "Bush" means authentic. Bush is raw, uncut!¹¹

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Wilk: I just remember Bob telling everybody: "Oh, she's the captain." Because Saudah left the group.

Dottie: Her and Bob used to argue a lot, so she just said, "F the group." I remember choreographing from that album that Bob had out—*Gold Coast Saturday Night*. And he just started letting me. Because he started teaching less. Especially when I started showing people what to do, he was just happy. So yeah, I just started teaching and I was dance captain. And I was creating stuff. I was studying different videos. I got access to videos. And **I would study**. Like people didn't have them [then]. They weren't so easy to get.

Wilk: We would get together, on Turner street [where we lived].

Dottie: Yeah, I would tell him, I want to do this.

Wilk: I want to do this, so we have to study how this drumming go.

Dottie: Right. **That's how we do work together.** I couldn't make it without him. Get that part of it. 'Cause I can get an idea together and I go with him

¹¹ What was "bush stuff"? "Village dance and music," "authentic," not staged, Wilk says. What was the repertoire? Saka was a saxophonist in an Accra group, played highlife and other popular musics, and created folk operas. He also promoted attention to village and ethnic traditions in the post-independence era. Ione Nash says Saka preferred modern dance. For more on Saka, see "Additional Resources." For overall Kulu Mele repertoire, see Hazzard-Donald, "Dancing in the Spirit," and Hampton, "Kulu Mele." Defrantz enlarges the context. Cultural interchanges on slave ships during the Middle Passage are "the source of African American hybridity," he states in "African American Dance," p.6.

and then he gets the music and some ideas and we go ahead on and get it together.¹²

Wilk: And Bob would let us.

If's all connected

Wilk: In the fifties it was just like you see Desi Arnaz on the *I Love Lucy* show. He come on, "Babalu!" Remember that? You hear different things, but you didn't connect 'em. As far as a lot of stuff, [it] sounds spooky to you. You know, you don't mess with this. You don't mess with that. Until later. It was in the mid-70s and the early 80s that we started really learning about the Orishas. About connecting them with the rhythms. This rhythm goes with this Orisha. This is who this dance goes with. Started putting it together.¹³ The first batá drum that I seen, George Cannon was playing it. But he was playing it by his self. And he was with Princess Starletta, who used to have a group around that time. And she used to have parties up on 63rd Street, where all the drummers would go.¹⁴

But I was told by Carol Butcher that George Cannon, Facundo and Minye used to play batá at

¹² Teaching and learning are central to these histories. Kulu Mele helped to build a folk arts education program at FACTS, the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School, where the African dance ensemble they started in 2005 still continues, and where, 50+ years earlier, when he was young, Wilk did garment industry piece work. FACTS, inspired by activist Grace Lee Boggs, collectively articulated critical folklore pedagogy: "How we teach one another who we need to be in order to be decent people imagining and building freedom." See Kodish, "Notes" and for a parallel indigenous example, King and Castle, *Warrior Women*.

¹³ Transformation narratives stand out in movement storytelling. Some read like origin narratives: recounting where and how we find ourselves decolonized, freed, more powerful, changed. Dottie and Wilk return to four key transformative moments, repeating touchstone stories about learning. We witness people doing research and study together. Reading through Ortiz. Seeing Gene Golden's films. Taking guidance from Peache. Immersing through Enrique's presence. Going to Cuba together. Ira describes this learning in terms of ritual: crucial experiential steps in embodying learning and culture, and in advancing cultural change. "Hunger for the culture," Dottie and Wilk say, claiming energy, passion, driving force.

¹⁴ Wil Letman remembers that Starletta was from Sierra Leone. For something of her story, see Peters, "Cat Lady."

Obalumi's [Yoruba] temple on South Street. He's the one that started ODUNDE. But they used to play at the temple.¹⁵

One of my friends, lived in the projects with us, used to play with us. K'shaka [Robert Jasper]. He went to Syracuse to college and he seen a book in there by Fernando Ortiz.¹⁶ And they had the batá written in it. So he took the book out of the library and sent it down to Bob and them. Bob could read music. So we started studying up batá out of this book. That's how I started!

The first ones playing batá was Minye, Facundo and George Cannon. But the first ones, when they started studying the book, that was doing it intensively was Peache, Lamb and Facundo. And me, Bob and Adewole. And we started studying that book.

Facundo might have got that book from someplace else and wrote the music out of it. Because when I seen it, I never seen the book. I seen the music that he wrote. Nice and big and clear! Like a blue ledger book. That's how he wrote it. He wrote it in there. And they were studying from that book. Facundo, Peache and Lamb were upstairs and [me, Bob and Adewole] were downstairs. Baba said, "You know we're the second battery." I said, "Okay!" But Facundo had made a set of batá. He was a craftsman. He could do that kind of stuff. And then Peache went to New York and [was] studying with Julito.¹⁷ And then **we started studying the culture.**

¹⁵ Obalumi Ogunseye came here c. 1962. For his involvement with the establishment of a Yoruba Temple on South Street, see Fernandez, *Recollections*, 36-37, Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 164-174.

¹⁶ See Moore, "Fernando Ortiz."

¹⁷ Fernando Ortiz hired Francisco Aguabella (1925-2010) and Julito Collazo (1925-2004) as drummers for his lecture demonstrations. Ortiz introduced them to Katharine Dunham. She hired them to tour with her company and brought them to the U.S. (1952-1954). Collazo and Aguabella settled in NYC by 1954, where Baba Crowder met them through Dunham. Marta Moreno Vega reports that Collazo told her he knew only about twenty-five Orisha believers in New York City when he arrived. Julito's pivotal role in the development of Orisha



"That was the beginning of the bará when we had the book. I had two congas. Adewole [is on the right] and Bob [on the left]. Look how big that bará drum is that he got? They didn't know the dimensions then. Got the music up on the chair."—John Wilkie. Photo courtesy John Wilkie.

Afro-Cuban culture. And we didn't really, really, see it until we went to New York, and a brother named Gene Golden showed movies, of the culture of this, [of people dancing in Cuba]. He paved the way for a lot of stuff. And he was among Bob's and them first students. When Bob went to New York, that's who he taught. Gene Golden and all of them. [Gene] gave a film thing and we went to see it and that's how we seen how it really go.

Dottie: Cuban, Afro-Cuban.

Wilk: And that's when we first seen it. And that's how it go. It's all connected. Because the first rhythm in the book is Elegba. And the first rhythm, the first deity you play to in ceremonies is Elegba. And the last. So **we started connecting**. We started finding out what each deity meant. And then from there we had the idea. When we seen his film, we seen all the different dances that the Orishas were doing. So we really connected it then. We seen this is Elegba, this is Yemaya.

Dottie: Bobby Crowder, he was reading the book he was telling you about. He was studying the book, he was learning the rhythms. And he started creating dances from the music. So like for instance, Yemaya. He was doing the rhythm for Yemaya. And I'm sure that he seen what Yemaya meant, so he created a dance. And we were dancing with fishnets. We knew she was about the water and the ocean and fishing. And so he created that. That was his interpretation of that. And we got pictures of that when we were dancing with the fishnets.

Wilk: So Bob and them knew about the ceremonies.

But we wasn't going to ceremonies then, too much.

Dottie: Right, we didn't know. Because a lot of times a lot of stuff was kept secretive.

culture and sacred drumming extended to Philadelphia, through Baba Crowder, Peache Jarman, and other Philadelphia drummers. See Vega, "The Yoruba Orisha Tradition," 201-204, and Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 157-163. And see Vega, "Interlocking African Diaspora Cultures in the Work of Fernando Ortiz" and Moore, "Fernando Ortiz."

Wilk: It was a secret.

Dottie: It was a secret. And we started seeing different stuff going down.

Wilk: It wasn't as open like it is now.

Dottie: Now, it's everywhere. You can see ocha being made on television!

Wilk: They got it on postcards now.

Dottie: The religion was kept on the down low. You didn't talk about it like they do now. You didn't talk about it. I still don't really broadcast it. Because people be saying the same thing.

Wilk: "Idol worshippers." "Oh, they voodoo." "They do voodoo." "They do witchcraft." "They evil." They give it a bad name. And it's not that. And I don't feel like explaining myself. So I keep it to myself. They down it. Carol used to say, when she was living over on Wister Street, "My mother coming over. Gotta put all this stuff away. My mother's coming. Put all that stuff in the closet!"

Dottie: [Laughing] Yes!

Wilk: Right, 'Cause I was in the church every Sunday.

Dottie: Me, too!

Wilk: When I was little, all the way up.

Dottie: I was in the choir. They had me in there. I was an usher. My mom wasn't going. They had me going, though.

Wilk: A lot of that stuff is still in me, so.

Dottie: I say I'm a Christian Yoruba. That's what I [say]. I didn't drop nothing, I just added something.

Peache was in it

Wilk: Peache was in it. [He was in the religion].

Dottie: He was in it when he was studying with Facundo, upstairs [at the Lee Cultural Center].

And then he went to California. He got initiated in California. I didn't even know about none of that then either.

Wilk: See because he was studying with Facundo.

[Then] he left Facundo and went to New York. And he start playing with Julito and Mongo and all of them. In New York. And that's when he really got in. He was around it. Because Julito was a priest. He was **one of the early ones that brought a lot of consciousness** to the Afro-Cuban thing here. You know. But he was in New York. That was before Puntillo. And before all of them. And they had a dynamite group over there: Willie Bobo and all of them. So, [Peaché] came back and he would come down my house and show me, in the cellar. Say, "Wilk, this is this." And I'd say, "Ohhh, I see it now." [That's a turning point because what we were studying had no feeling]. You know, we just had the notes. So [Peaché] started connecting the dots. He said, "This is this, and this is this." [Mimics playing drums.] 'Cause he was over there playing it. And then from there he went to California. He left. 'Cause he was actually going with Mongo's granddaughter. Peaché was in it. He was living it over there with Patato and all of them. He was over there with all of them. So he's the one. And he went to California. He was in it.

Dottie: I remember when Peaché got these tapes and stuff of some Cuban stuff, Cuban dancing—and that was like gold. "We got these tapes! Can't wait to go home and look at these! Nobody has these!" You know?

Wilk: When we first went to New York and seen the relationships between—Because Bob didn't know everything. And when we went to New York and seen those films that Gene Golden showed, that's when we first seen. I said, "Oh, that's what go with that."

Dottie: I say, "**There's more to be learned here.**"

All the people in the culture was there

Wilk: I met Saka when he came here.

That was in 1976.¹⁸

Dottie: When they had that Bicentennial. Because he came here with all the groups. They were on the Parkway in front of the Art Museum. That was an amazing time when that happened.

Wilk: Yeah. I seen them Haitians. And they had it going on. '76. Everybody came here!

Dottie: It's like they picked up a part of Africa and put it down on the Parkway in front of the Art Museum. Fabulous! Fabulous! And it was all free. Because we went down there one time on our bikes, didn't we? They had it for a couple days.

Wilk: There was Brazil was here. The Haitians. The Africans.

Dottie: It was amazing. People from all the groups. Arthur's groups. Everybody. All the people in the culture was there.

Wilk: And Saka, he brought northern Ghana with him.

Dottie: Right! And that was "Whew!"

Wilk: Northern Ghana is different. When I heard that sound, I said, "Well, that's where Irish music came from!" The way they was playing? It sound like Irish

¹⁸ Saka Acquaye reconnected with local musicians, dancers and cultural people when he brought "an African Village" to the Parkway during Philadelphia's Bicentennial (1976). Dottie and Wilk describe sporadic visits back and forth between Kulu Mele, continental and Caribbean drummers. It took ten more years for Baba to visit Saka in Ghana for the first time (c. 1985) "to continue his learning." But for more than 70 years, there have been active interchanges between continental, diasporan and Philadelphian drummers and dancers and cultural workers: long-term (if intermittent) relationships support Kulu Mele's growth and excellences. Local activists challenged Bicentennial celebrations on many counts. Richard Watson and others describe how Philadelphia's African Museum (now AAMP) was founded as a result. See *We Speak*, 188-191. On the choice not to invest in Arthur Hall's Ile Ife Center, and existing African Village and community cultural development work in North Philadelphia, see Jessica Lautin, *Elite and the Street*, 198-224. See the *1975 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife* program book for the Wulomei group, brought there by Acquaye, for a possible indication of what people heard the following year in Philadelphia. Also see Younge, *Music and Dance Traditions of Ghana*.



Kulu Mele drummers lead the procession at ODUNDE. Top: Truck, Peache and Baba. Bottom: Kenny, Baba and Wilk on bata. Photos: Thomas B. Morron, c. 1990s.



Dottie with Kulu Mele dancers at ODUNDE, before a performance. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1990s.

music, you know, to me. I could hear that in that.

Dottie: And didn't we see them perform at the Y on Chestnut Street? Saka's group performed there. I don't know if that was affiliated with the Bicentennial or not. That's when they were going "Go 'round. Go ring that bell." They did that there.

Wilk: Oh yeah. They came up Lee Cultural Center. And Saka, he came up there to our [Kulu Mele] rehearsal. And this big fat guy, he would be sitting outside carving stuff. There'd be a lot of stuff going on. He'd be outside carving [makes carving motions with his hands].

Dottie: Next time you see [him], you'd see something!

Wilk: Yeah, then next time you see, you'd see something [he had carved]. He played the frame drum. It was a drum shaped like a frame. You sit on it and play that.

They kept the religion kind of secret

Dottie: So while Peache was in California, then Enrique came through.¹⁹

Wilk: Right.

Dottie: And then when Enrique came, you know, Enrique came with the religion. We had seen it because when they started playing the batá and I saw some of the priests and stuff, coming through Kulu Mele. You know, coming in to speak to Bob. And I seen people prostrating. You know, like laying down, saluting and stuff. I said, "What is all that about?! I'll never do that!" [laughing] And then Evelyn, she got in the group. And she was initiated. But they kept the religion like kind of secret.²⁰

Wilk: Right, but Facundo was already in the religion.

¹⁹ 1982-1984 remains a memorable time, a touchstone memory, revisited often. Multiple tellings are included here, reminder of the weight and presence of this time and its continuing reverberation. For an approach to non-linear time, see Rasheedah Phillips.

²⁰ For the development of Philadelphia's Orisha community and drumming and dance traditions, see Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 25-26, 154-163. See Betty Alridge, Carol Butcher, and others for memories about attitudes and closeted practices, "Honoring Ancestors," 6-7, 24.

And Carol was in the religion.

Dottie: And then Evelyn came and she was in it. But I didn't know that she was in it, like that. And then when Enrique came, then they started coming out of the woodworks about "They in the religion." When Enrique came, you know, that's what connected my dots. 'Cause they started the group with Enrique. And Evelyn knew some of the dances, too. Because she came in the group. Facundo got in the group. For a minute. And I started seeing that Evelyn knew some of the Orisha stuff. And then she got crowned. She got crowned Oshun. And then— Who brought Carol in there? Would you say Powell brought Carol in?

Wilk: Carol? Powell.

Dottie: She was crowned, too. So— But a lot of stuff she didn't know either. And then Enrique was showing us. And then I started connecting the dots. But then when Enrique came to Philadelphia and they started the Cumbayé group. For me, he started teaching the dance to Yemaya that goes with the rhythm, the song and that got me. That made me drawn to the tradition itself. **And when they started connecting, that feeling just went through me. It went deep down in.** When I started connecting the rhythm, the song, the dance. And then they started doing ceremony. And I would go with the drummers. They go play bembés and stuff. And I would watch people in the bembés and learn a lot of stuff! How they danced. I sit back and watch. I knew a little bit and I started learning more and more and more and more and more. And it just got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. Yeah, that was a big craze. And I didn't— It took a long time before I went to make ocha. It was a whole lot.

Wilk: Yeah. And me even longer. Because I'm always a skeptic. And the thing that drew me to it was music. You know. To me everything else is iffy. **But the music I knew was real.**

Dottie: I got into it through Enrique. ‘Cause Wilk and Enrique and them used to go do ceremonies in Philadelphia. Cause he was an *aña* drummer. And they were doing ceremonies and I would go to ceremonies with them. And I would see people dancing to the Orishas, singing the songs and everything started connecting. From that, from Enrique and going to the *bembés*, that’s when I started connecting Orishas and feeling them and learning about them. So I learned about Oshun, Yemaya, Oya, Babaluaye. And of course, *rhumbas* and *comparsas*. I never knew them before. It was very exciting. It was so much fun. ‘Till I was worried. I said, “The devil’s going to jump down here. Because I don’t want this to end. And this is so good!” I couldn’t wait until it was rehearsal time again. They used to come and rehearse in our cellar.

Wilk: In North Philly.

Dottie: Right. In North Philly. And the rhythms! And we were studying the dance, and what they were planning on performing. And I was learning all the dances. And the songs. I didn’t know that then.

It was a real small cellar, but it was magic

Wilk: That’s what got us started though. Enrique really got us started.²¹ That’s when the *batá* really got

²¹ Cumbayé lasted c. 1982-1984. Enrique Tomás Aldama Admiral (c. 1959-1984), nicknamed *Quiquillo*, was an *aña* drummer, in his 20s, when he came here in 1980, leaving Cuba from Mariel Harbor. One of his parents was from a Havana neighborhood known for its *comparsas*, the carnival culture, and the other from Matanzas. His father made *batá* drums, and asked Puntillo to teach Enrique to play. Puntillo was likely his godfather in the religion. Tom Morton, who witnessed these encounters, recalled that Cuban refugees arriving in 1960 were treated like “*escorias*,” scum. It was all the more impressive that William Powell went to Fort Chafee (or where Mariel refugees were housed) to see if any drummers were there. Cumbayé drummers were William Powell, Enrique Aldama Admiral, Facundo (Ronald Harris), Truck (Andrew Jones), Hector Rivera (who introduced Powell and Enrique), Nick, Ernesto Patilla, Guillermo, Yanqui, and John Wilkie. It was six months before the women came into the group, Wilk says. Dancers were Carol Butcher, Evelyn Smart, Omomola Iyabunmi

hooked up. That’s when the music got intense. ‘Cause he would ask us, “How did you know that?” You know, because he’s from Cuba. You know. “How did you get this?” I said, “From Bob and Peache.” I said, “‘Cause we been reading it!” He said, “Wow.”

Dottie: I liked when Enrique came. You know, when I got a chance to study with him. I loved that.

Wilk: That was magic! That was a magic time.

Dottie: That was so wonderful. That was down in the basement in our house, a small, small basement. But it seemed big. It was not only Enrique. He brought some other [Cuban] people with him

Wilk: Then we saw how it really go. And [back] then, Castro kicked all the Cubans out that he didn’t want in Cuba. And so Nick is one of the Cuban boys that came to Philly. There was a lot of them that came. And Nick got Enrique and introduced him to Powell. And Powell started this group called Cumbayé with Enrique. And then is when we really started learning. They used to rehearse in my cellar, in North Philly.

Dottie: And see, they were rehearsing. They didn’t have any dancers yet, really. And I said, “Oh, I want to learn. I want some of this!” Enrique taught me.

Wilk: Because he could dance on a dime. That boy could dance.

Dottie: We got Evelyn—she found out about it. She came with Facundo.

Wilk: And Powell brought Carol [Butcher].

Dottie: And both of them was in the religion. [Evelyn] had just got into the religion. The religion was very secretive here, back then. Now it is all on Facebook, YouTube, ceremonies, [everything]. We started studying with them. It was me and Carol and Evelyn.

Wilk: And Omomola came.

Dottie: Enrique saw Omomola. He liked how Omomola looked. He asked her to come. Not that she was a dancer, but she could dance. She couldn’t

and Dottie Wilkie. See Omomola Iyabunmi, “Knocking on the spirit door.” For another account, see Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 175.



Enrique Aldama Adamo. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1982-1984.



Cumbayé with Truck, Wilk, Omomola Iyabunmi and others. Photos: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1982-1984.

dance for long because she would get possessed. She can't do a whole lot, like we did Yemaya [with a] whole lot of turning. She couldn't do that. She would go. So they would put her in the middle and dance around her.

Wilk: Because the drumming was intense, wasn't it?

Dottie: The drumming was hot.

Wilk: It was hot.

Dottie: Especially down in that cellar on Turner Street.

Wilk: It was a real small cellar. But it was magic. It was magic down there.

Dottie: Right, there was so much magic. That cellar seemed like it was as big as Broad Street!

Wilk: Yeah. I'm telling you!

Dottie: But it was small. So that made everything just go in. We had moved out of the projects and we had moved into his family's house. His father died.

Wilk: My father died so I moved back home. With my mom. It was a rowhouse. And we used to rehearse down in the cellar. [My mom] didn't mind. The neighbors used to say, "Oh you're all putting me to sleep." We had good neighbors.

Dottie: They didn't complain about it.

Wilk: Miss Stell across the street. She never complained. They didn't call the cops on us. That was the hardest thing about rehearsing, back in the day. People would call the cops on you.

Dottie: Because everybody didn't like it.

Wilk: Everybody wasn't with it. They called it noise. Making too much noise.

Dottie: Disturbing the peace. They just didn't want us practicing it.

Wilk: You'd go out in the park and play. The cops would run you out of the park. Sometimes they would ride up on horses, and say, "You gotta go."

Wilk: We used to play sometimes in the street, in North Philly. Play until the cops come. We used to play outside, on top of the roofs. Enrique's stuff, that was in the cellar. That was about it. There weren't too

many places to go. Even Arthur Hall, before they got Ile Ife, he was jumping around from place to place.²² Somebody's house. Sometimes they used to go to [the rec center at] 25th and Diamond, like that. There weren't a lot of places you could rehearse. It was hard.

Wilk: Well, see what happened is the house next door to me fell down and they tore the other houses down. Next door to us there was just one rowhouse. So, there wasn't nobody next to me. So that was almost like a blessing! Play down there and nobody bother us.

Dottie: People wasn't used to seeing those different dances, like the Orisha dancing. And so it was new to them. It wasn't that they didn't appreciate it. They just didn't know what it was. And then, everybody doesn't like it. Just 'cause you come from Africa doesn't mean you can dance and drum, y'know. Same here. Everybody here doesn't like Afro-Cuban dance. Just certain ones. **And that's what we've been carrying the torch for. The culture.**

•

Dottie: I said, I was enjoying that so much that I had told [Wilk], "This is not going to last." This is something that is so good, I am going to try to really enjoy this as much as I can because I know something is going to happen. It's not going to last. You know. The devil is going to come in here and he's going to bust us up. Because everybody was trying to get in the group.

Wilk: Yeah.

Dottie: And we didn't want that.

Wilk: And we were still in Kulu Mele.

Dottie: Right. We were still in Kulu Mele.

Wilk: And I was saying, "Bob, the stuff that we're reading. I'm getting it from the horse's mouth."

²² Wilk refers to the Ile Ife Center, the visionary cultural and community center in North Philadelphia that Arthur Hall established. It was home to Hall's dance company and offered visual art and cultural programs. This was social practice and community development work before these names were used. See Arthur Hall Alumni, *Ile Ife*, Wallace, *50 Years*, and Lautin, *Elite and the Street*.

Dottie: It lasted for awhile. That's why I said it was so nice and so special and I just had a feeling it wasn't going to last. You know people was hating. Like I felt the energy—the negative energy coming that they couldn't get in, that they was wishing bad for us, you know.

Wilk: Mmmhmm.

Dottie: And it happened, you know. And he brought it.

Wilk: But anyway, he ended up getting killed. He got into the drug world and he ended up getting killed.

Dottie: Right. Messing with somebody's money or something and you know, they killed him.

Wilk: Right. After Enrique got killed and we had his funeral, we did one more show. Peache came back to town. Powell came back. That was the last show of Cumbayé. We did it at Temple University. So there it is. So, she just kept going.

Dottie: **I just kept going, studying, learning stuff and putting it back.** You know, whoever was in Kulu Mele, I would give it to them. Say, "This is how it goes. This is what we're going to do." "This is what they wear." I'd get costumes made up, you know. I said, "Bob, I'm more than a dance captain here. I have to have another title." He said, "You're the Artistic Director." I said, "Well, what are you?" He said, "I am the Director." I said, "OK! That makes sense."

Wilk: He told me I was the Stage Manager! I'm still the Stage Manager!

And then it started growing

Dottie: So then, I got out and started dancing with Puntillo [Rios]. That was another Cuban group that was in New York.

Wilk: New Generation, that's what they were called.

Dottie: From Enrique, we started doing bembés with Enrique and then it started growing. And I would always go with him when he'd go to a bembé. I wanted to go. Well, we would go to New York.

We would go to New York and be in bembés and [Puntillo] knew. He heard about us because when Enrique died, he didn't have any money or nothing. Wilk and I went and got him some clothes to be buried in. And Puntillo heard how we treated Enrique, too. And then, he liked Wilk. But he remembered that. He knew about that part. And he really respected us for that. Because Enrique was from Havana and Puntillo knew Enrique. So we started going to bembés and seeing Puntillo.

Wilk: Because Enrique's father told Puntillo to teach him, when Enrique was young. Puntillo taught Enrique when he was young. 'Cause Enrique went to New York and he played with Puntillo. If he'd stayed with Puntillo he would have been all right.

Dottie: He was coming back and forth.

Wilk: Puntillo would come to Philly to do bembés and we would go. After awhile he was big. He [started] being all over. I would go and watch and sometimes he let me sit in. He would show me different stuff.

Dottie: And then eventually he got into the religious part of the religious drumming because you got presented to *aña*.

Wilk: They wash your hands so you can play the sacred drums.

Dottie: Right.

Wilk: It's a ceremony you go through. So he's my godfather in *aña*.

Dottie: And then he asked me to work with him. He said, "I got a show." We did a show here with him at the Painted Bride. We got pictures of that downstairs. Orlando Puntillo Rios. I danced Oshun. The first time I danced it by myself. I probably did it down at ODUNDE. Been so long, Hard to put all these things together. But I performed with them in a couple of places.

Wilk: You went to Chicago.

Dottie: Yes. And I didn't know as much as I know now.

Like I can give more now. But I was still learning.
But I knew enough that he thought I could dance
with his group.

Wilk: Yeah.

Dottie: And that wasn't even my dress! He gave me that
dress to wear! And he gave me that fan to dance with.

Wilk: And Evelyn made you up

Dottie: Yes, she made me up.

Wilk: I was in the audience and when she came out, I
was like, "Is that Dottie?" That's how she was made
up. I've got a picture of it downstairs I can show you.
All of that and we were still in Kulu Mele

Dottie: Still in Kulu Mele. [In those days, Kulu Mele
was performing at] ODUNDE.²³ And not a lot. We
never got a lot of work with Kulu Mele. One time we
went up to New York.

Wilk: We played for Larry Holmes when he won the
championship. In Easton, Pennsylvania. [In 1978.]

Dottie: We didn't work much but we just did a lot of
rehearsing. And it was just a time of learning.

Wilk: We was incorporating the Afro-Cuban stuff then,
along with the other stuff.

I want to dance to this drum

Wilk: The first time we saw Les Ballets Africains²⁴ was
in the 70s [in Philadelphia] and [the ballet] was all
about the revolution in Guinea. The second time we
seen them, it was the culture. It was Mali Sadjo. And

²³ Kulu Mele members have participated in the ODUNDE festival since the first year, 1974. Drummers lead the procession to the river and the company performs on stage. Dottie has choreographed new Oshun dances every year. For ODUNDE, see Metzger, Fernandez, Davis, and Special ODUNDE Issue.

²⁴ Musical and cultural history is reckoned here in terms of when certain drums entered lives, repertoire and consciousness. This section clusters memories from across two decades around djembe drum (and related dance). Memories start with Les Ballets Africains touring here (1971 and 1973) and shift to Jaasu (1985-1990). But stories and relationships go back even farther. Baba Crowder knew Ladj Camera from New York in the late 1950s. Wilk recalls that Baba played with Ladj in Olatunji's group. For background on Les Ballets Africains, and the impact of Guinean and other African musicians here, see Eric Charry, "Introduction" and Price, "Rhythms of Culture," 238-241.

the scene opened and the girl [was] dancing around
with the hippopotamus!²⁵

Dottie: Right. And then we went to New York to see
them again.

Wilk: Yeah. We were so overwhelmed.

Dottie: I wanted to see them again so we went to New
York.

Wilk: Went to the Apollo.

Dottie: And they put us closer to see 'em! It wasn't
empty but we could get a seat right in the front.
That's the hunger. Hungry for the culture.

Wilk: **But [we saw] that's a different kind of drum.**
And a whole different thing.

Dottie: I said, "Oh, I love this and I want to see some
more of this." This type of stuff just amazed me. It
wasn't right away [that we learned how to drum and
dance to djembe]. It took time.

Wilk: Kwasi, Chuckie, Steve, Tommy Smart and
them— They were down ODUNDE. It was in the
evening. I seen them playing [that drum]. I said,
"That's it!" I said, "That's close!" But Kwasi always say
Bobby Artis started him.

Dottie: But I seen Kwasi playing the drum. I said, "I'm
going to speak to him about this!" This is it! You
know, **the stuff was getting closer and closer.** The
djembe getting in it.

Wilk: That was the first djembe group in town.

Dottie: That made me want to learn to dance to the
djembe drums when I seen Kwasi with the drum.
And he knew how to play it. And that's when I
asked Kwasi, "Kwasi, where can I get a drum like
that?" 'Cause I wanted to get Wilk a drum like that.
Because I wanted him to play. And he got me one.
And I gave it to him for his birthday present. And I
said, "**Wilk, I want to dance to this drum.** You got to
learn how to play this drum!" And that's what he did!

Wilk: We went to New York and went to a class of
Mamed Keita. Taught us this [djembe and dance]

²⁵ Les Ballets Africains came to Philadelphia first in 1959. See "African Ballet has Brilliant Opening" and "African Ballet Troupe."

class in this armory. And I came back and I told Kwasi, “You could do the same thing. Man, you could have classes here.” That’s when they started having classes at the Y. On Broad Street.

Dottie: When I started seeing [African] ballet stuff, that’s when I really wanted to go in and study the different types of dancing that I wasn’t getting in Kulu Mele. ‘Cause **I seen where Kulu Mele can grow more.** I seen the djembe. I seen we wasn’t doing that. I seen there was more to learn. So that was a start. And then he got the drum. Then I said, “Now, I gotta find out how to dance to that, too.” And then Kwasi opened the door for that. He said, ‘Well, we’re starting some classes. I got this guy, James Marshall, and Jackie Corley.’ And I started going to the classes. James was telling me, “We gonna start a company. You pick up good. You want— Would you like to get in the company?” And that’s where that elevated my dancing to djembe, West African dance, Guinea dance, Senegalese dance.

Wilk: But she didn’t take that to Kulu Mele.

Dottie: Right. I respected. I drew a line there. Because I wanted to study. I wanted to dance it. And I know that Bob wasn’t doing it and he didn’t know it. And so I stayed there and studied. I stayed there with them for a long time. I was with that group for at least six years. I said, “This is some good stuff here.” And I never did none of Jaasu’s stuff in Kulu Mele. We kept it separate. Because I respect the group that I’m in. I don’t want to take stuff and put it in there. The only time I started doing the West African stuff is when [Kwasi] dispersed the group. He broke the group up. He going to do something else.

Wilk: Right. And Fasina, she was in the group!

Dottie: Look. We got a picture of it! She did a performance with us! She was about five! She got in it because she was going to rehearsal with me. And one of the teachers, not only James Marshall

but Jackie Corley—I would have Fasina to all our rehearsals and she was picking up stuff. And then Jackie said, “You know, she can do this too!” But I took Oyin. And I took Steve’s wife, Denise. She’s Denise Jackson now because she met Steve when she went to the class, you know. And we start taking class and we was doing so good they asked us to get in the company.

Wilk: And Oyin was with us for almost 20 years, with Kulu Mele. And see, Jaasu was named after Kwasi’s son. But he started the djembe thing here in Philly. Kwasi and Steve and they taught Chuckie.

Dottie: There weren’t too many djembe players. They were playing congas and stuff.

Wilk: Right. And all that came from Bob. **Bob was the one who started all of that.**

One day we might get there

Wilk: What surprises me is how them shows turn out! That’s what surprises me! How they turn out! Wow! Be like you’re looking at it too. Because when you’re rehearsing, you’re rehearsing. But when you see it in full costumes, it’s like something different. Something else.

Dottie: Right. And it’s just things just happen. You see. You have a vision. Like the hip-hop dancers that I put in the group. What brought me there was the stilt walkers in the group was not showing up. Or they come out and they dance for a few minutes and they complain about money. And I’m looking at my son [Ali] dancing and his friends, and I said, “They can fill this spot here.” And I started talking to them. I said, “You all need to come and perform with me. You can dance to the drum. Same thing.” And that went over tremendously well! Moustapha had taught us a dance called Yankadi, and after we did Yankadi, I figured where we could squeeze the hip hop in there.



Kulu Mele family pictures:

Top: Dancers (l-r): Oyin, Dottie, Binta. Drummers: Okikilu, Peache, Wilk, Jomo, Baba, Kenny, Ishmael, Truck, masked dancer. c. 1990s.

Bottom: Dancers: Oyin, Monica, Nana Antiwaa Bey (reclining), Dottie, Desiree, Amope, Binta. Drummers: Jomo, Baba Deli, Kenny, Truck, Baba, Ishmael, Wilk, Peache. Maskers. Photos courtesy John Wilkie.

Facing page:

Top:
 Front: Angela Watson, Payin Schley. Middle: Ali Wilkie, Baba, Eddie Smallwood. Back: Kenny, Dottie, Arisa Ingram, Omar Harrison, Wilk, Ama Schley, Ishmael. c. 2000s.

Bottom:
 (l-r): Najuma Lagbara, Wilk, Ama Schley, Arisa Ingram, Okikilu, Angela Watson, Kenny, Dottie, Mecca Madyun. Photos courtesy John Wilkie.



We did that on Broad and South [in 2006]. That's the first time I had come up with that idea, how to exchange movement. Like we do hip hop and they do the African, and we went back and forth and then we did stuff together. That went over well in Africa too.²⁶ I wanted to show how they won't know the difference. That blew us up! They loved it! Everybody loved it. Everybody said, "You did a good thing there." And now everybody's doing it!

Wilk: Yeah, everybody's doing it! But we were the first ones.

Dottie: And [Ali and Eddie] learned African dance!

Wilk: Then they switched over to African dance just like that!

Dottie: So I said. "Now, you all just doing this— you all need to come to rehearsal and get in some of these dances!" And they did!

Wilk: They love dundunba!

Dottie: Yeah, Yusuf was telling me, "Yeah, we gotta get dundunba back. We gotta do a dundunba piece!"

Dottie: I always wanted to take the group to West Africa, so they can continue to learn, and be in the source, be where it comes from. And fortunately, I got funded to take the group to Guinea [to study] with M'Bemba Bangoura.²⁷ We went to Guinea and studied the play Mali Sadjo. And that was a wonderful trip. We rehearsed and studied that. We bought drums for that. We went to the marketplace, bought cloth. We had costumes made up. I had a videographer with me. I had a producer to video everything that was going on. And we just had a

²⁶ These reflections catch Kulu Mele in the early 2000s, when Dottie has begun to use hip hop dancers in place of stiltwalkers, dancing to Yankadi: mixing forms. Yonge makes observations on cultural mixing, teaching in the face of globalization and cultural appropriation and overwriting in Ghanaian dance.

²⁷ In 2008, the "Malissadio" dance that Les Ballets Africains performed thirty years before becomes a Kulu Mele piece. See Kodish, "Kulu Mele in Guinea: Travel Stories" for Kulu Mele reflections on their 2008 trip.

good time. We studied. We went to see different ballets that would never get here. Like excellent, excellent, ballets, companies in Guinea that M'Bemba took us around to. Different places. We went and saw rehearsals with Ballets Africains.

Wilk: And a place where he learned.

Dottie: Right. A place that M'Bemba studied with.

So that trip was awesome. So, I wanted [the group] to get that feel of how they do. How they studied. How the different Ballets in Africa study. And how they keep their culture going. And it's a funny thing, though. When we went over there, we performed at the embassy there. And we performed a dance, but I had put hip-hop in the dance also. And that blew the people in Guinea—that blew their mind. Anybody who could see a television over there! The hip-hop dancers was the most popular people in Guinea at that time. They loved them. And it's so funny. We went to try to learn the culture over there and they were trying to learn our culture, which is the hip-hop.

Wilk: They wanted to learn our stuff! And [Eddie and Ali] became stars over there. Where we stayed in this compound, they would snatch them and take them to the village!

Dottie: So that's why I wanted to take them to West Africa, so they could get a chance [to experience to the culture]. I had already been to Guinea and I wanted them to experience Guinea.

Wilk: [Now] they're putting djembe with batá! They're doing everything! All the music pretty soon— The only pure music'll be here! You know, because Africa, they're just mixing, mixing, mixing, mixing. I think since Eddie and Ali went there! Guinea done went into a thing! They changed Guinea!

Dottie: Because they want hip-hop! They want our history and we want theirs! And its funny how we went there and had this criss cross like that.

Wilk: That's what they really like.

Everything just went in line

Dottie: [Over the years, I watch] different ballets. African ballets. And Afro-Cuban ballets. I watch. And then I see how they choreograph and then I learn from that.²⁸ When I studied with Jaasu [I learned]. I learned from Bob, too, the way he put things together. That's how I learned my choreography, first. From him. And how he just told me how to use the stage and the front and the back and the side— Because [Bob] knew how to do [stuff]. John Hines,²⁹ he worked with him before, too. He might have learned some of the stuff from Saka. But I learned that from Bob. And the stuff I learned from him helped me to move forward. And then I studied videos. And seen shows. And that's just how I got it together. That's the only way I can put it, really. And then we went to different places. We went to Washington to study with KanKouran, Jaasu Ballet did. And then later I got KanKouran to come up and put a piece on the company, [on Kulu Mele]. You know, when I started learning stuff. Everything just went in line. [Walked] over to Jaasu.

²⁸ Time telescopes in recollection. Standing out in Dottie and Wilk's memories are four key transformative experiences from early years of learning. Subsequent years blur. By the 1990s, culture was "beginning to be more plentiful" and Kulu Mele was in demand. Kulu Mele continued to perform annually at ODUNDE, and in local schools and community celebrations. Dottie began to teach the African Rhythms group at University of Pennsylvania (1993-1999), choreographed social dance for ODUNDE's Huckleback to Hip-Hop (1994) and pursued advanced teaching and learning: study residencies and travel with dancers and drummers from Guinea, Senegal, Ghana and Cuba. This included (for example): Study in Afro-Cuban dance with Xiomara Rodriguez (1995). Three trips to Cuba. Two trips to Ghana with Baba Crowder (1995, 2005) including study with Nii Yartey. Travel to Guinea to study with Les Ballets Africains (2000, 2007). Apprenticeships with Guineans M'Bemba Bangoura and Youssouf Koumbassa (1998, 2000) and Tenenfig Dioubate (2003). A trip to Senegal to study with the National Dance Company of Senegal (2003). And an apprenticeship in Senegalese dance with Assane Konte (2004).

²⁹ For Hines, see Dalili, *More Than a Sisterhood*, 51-53, who observes that Hines is considered a father of African dance in Philadelphia, and also "taught drummers African rhythms," and knew (through touring with Dunham) Cuban rhythms. Also see Gottschild, 297 and her chart after 282.

Wilk: We left Jaasu, then we started incorporating West African into Kulu Mele.

Dottie: So I learned this and I said, "I got to go further and try to bring some of these dancers in." I used to take classes in New York too.

Wilk: M'Bemba and Youssouf used to come through. Assane from Washington D.C. Kissima from Senegal, Moustapha from Guinea. Amaniyea from Muntu, from Chicago. [We] also studied with her.

Dottie: Jackie Corley, James Marshall. Ishangi taught a class, Ms. Nash taught.

Wilk: [Shula] from Nigeria taught us the Yoruba language in the late 70s or early 80s. He came to rehearsal. Bob met him somewhere.

Dottie: Zoia Cisneros [taught]. I had Ron Brown. We had workshops with him, I had him come in and do workshops with us. And we went to New York for a whole four or five days. He has a conference each year and the dancers went and took that. Just to get a feel of some other stuff, you know. Other than the traditional. So I'm trying to grow in that area, too.³⁰ Kulu Mele presents, as far as West African, [dance from] Senegal and Guinea and some Ghana and some Mali. And we also present Afro-Cuban dance. [And] we study. I always try to bring artists in to choreograph stuff, to give us more work, to help us learn the stuff that we do so that we can continue to build our excellence.

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Dottie: As far as the Yoruba dancing, I learned a lot from going to ceremonies. I'll go in there and watch ceremony. I don't even have to dance. I'm going in there and study. And I did that for a long time. For years. Just going to bembés in New York, Washington, Atlantic City. And study ceremony. I

³⁰ In the last two decades in particular, Lela Aisha Jones observes, Dottie notably pursued collaborations with African American and Latinx women choreographers working in ranges of traditional and neo-traditional styles, including Danys La Mora Perez, Zoia Cisneros, Lela Aisha Jones / Flyground, Nzinga Metzger and others.



Kulu Mele in Guinea: the group.
Hip-hop in Guinea: Eddie and Ali.
Photos: Gabe Błenczycki, 2008.

was getting how to dance to the Orishas. And the steps that they do to the Orishas. And the steps that they do when they sing certain songs. Like it's a dance I created—it's a mixture of Oshun that I added onto the Oshun that we're doing now. And I had seen a bembé in Atlantic City and they was dancing to Oshun. And Oshun came down. The Orisha came down. And this woman who was crowned Oshun. And they took her out. They took her and dressed her up and brought her back out and she started dancing. And she had this beautiful skirt on. And then everybody that was dancing took a piece of her skirt and they started dancing her around while she was in the middle, dancing around in the circle. And this was when Enrique was living. Because Enrique played that bembé, right?

Wilk: Yeah. He was there.

Dottie: And I never used it. It was something in my mind that stayed with me. And then, this year is the first time I used that in a show. And we did it down ODUNDE this time. I added it and everybody loved it in there and they wondered, "Where you get that from?" That's from way decades back. That's something that I learned.

Wilk: In Atlantic City.

Dottie: And I never seen it done again But I never used it again until this year, I put it in the front of my Oshun piece. **So I learn stuff. And I hold it.**

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Dottie: But it grew— Our interpretation of dance from where, from the 50s to where it is now is amazing!

Wilk: Oh yeah.

Dottie: Like, it is back. It was snatched.

Wilk: Oh yeah. I got a song downstairs by Billy Eckstine, back in the day, called Babalu. He was singing about Babalu and Shango! Just like in the Cotton Club, they used to have inserts of African-like stuff. It wasn't the real stuff. They would just have some kind of excerpt, with the African culture. And

then, when we used to have the cabarets, mostly all the cabarets I went to, when the band took a break, they had somebody do African dance. That's where you'd see Bob, Slater, Hamp—

Dottie: They called it interpretive dance.

Wilk: That's what they called it. It was Bob and Slater and Hamp and all of them. Different people. They were drumming and dancing, and they'd do a little skit.

Dottie: And they would make up stuff, too. What they feel is African dance.

Wilk: They called it interpretive dance. They had that little excerpt and then boom, back to the band. You know the band would take a break. And they hooked that up. Used to have a lot of cabarets. They would insert that in the stuff.

Dottie: And some of it would be nasty.

Wilk: (laughs) Yeah. . .

Dottie: Sexy. Like sex. Projecting sex.

Wilk: I was thinking of Slater because he told Bobby Crowder, "I give 'em filth, Bobby, that's what they want!" And Slater was gay, and he said, "I give 'em filth, Bobby. That's what they want." You know.³¹

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Wilk: Because you got to keep it interesting. If it's all authentic, it won't sell. Like my mother used to tell me, "You gotta have a gimmick." She said, "Pure culture will go but so far." You know some of it gotta be authentic. And then you can have your contemporary stuff. My father he just said, "The young people will make you all." That's what he used to say. That was back in the 70s. He seen us in the 70s. He came to one of the shows. He was a mason and he came with some of his buddies. And he told me, "The young people will make you all." And my mom said, "Yeah, you gotta have a gimmick." So

³¹ Hortense Allen Jordan produced, directed, choreographed and danced in these shows. She bristled that people called you a "shake dancer" if you did this kind of work.

hip-hop was the gimmick. That is a gimmick. And you have to have that. And then you have to have authentic stuff along with it. Like Ira, he brings the masks.

Dottie: I don't want to go too far away from the tradition. But I will extend out. And that's why I had Jeffrey [Page] come in. Because Jeffrey worked with me on that piece that we did at African Rhythms. Because he was the West African dance teacher. And I was the Afro-Cuban. And I told him what I was doing. I'm doing the Ogun and Oshun thing and I showed [him what I wanted]. He just added stuff to it. Like he had Oshun coming out with— She had a dress with a trail as long as from that wall to in here, and she walked out. I didn't think about putting all that in. But he knows all that kind of stuff. And he was growing at that time, too.

You can see how the culture was kept alive there

Dottie: I liked the trip to Guinea. That was in 2008. Of course, I've been to Senegal and I've been to Ghana. Baba Crowder took me to Ghana where I met his teacher, Saka Acquaye. That was a great time. You know, something to remember. And then of course, going to Cuba, getting initiated. That was special. And then going to Santiago. Going to Havana at first was special and then coming back going to Santiago, it blew my mind.

Wilk: That's like ODUNDE every day.

Dottie: That's why I wanted you all to go. But also, like I said, we do Afro-Cuban dance and I always wanted to let them have the experience of going to Cuba and see how the culture is there. Even though their culture comes from West Africa, from Nigeria. You can see how the culture was kept alive there.

Dottie: Peache got initiated in California. He got presented. He could play on an aña drum. He didn't own them. And nobody in Philadelphia owned them, either. Peache had a godbrother that lived in California that told him about Papo Angarica's house [in Havana]. And probably how he could get drums. Aña drums. So Peache had got the Pew grant. So he decided that he had got this money, and he was going to get him some aña drums. And got the information about Papo Angarica and he was saying he was going to Cuba. And then I decided I wanted to go too. Looked like it was a chance for me to go and be initiated. And that's how we got my first trip to Cuba. So we went with him. It was Kenny, Paul, me, Wilk, and Peache. That's who all went the first time, when I went to Havana to make ocha [and Peache got the drums, the first aña drums in Philly]. That was in 2000.³²

And then I went back again the following year to Santiago, because the first ten days of July, there is a beautiful Fire Festival over there. Nzinga and people that she was with from Tallahassee was going. I was Iyawo then. I went with them to Santiago and it was amazing. And it was so much to see and learn that I always wanted the company to see what I saw there. That's the first time I seen La Mora. When they have that [Fire] Festival going on they have different groups performing all over Cuba. And her group was performing at this theater. She presented some work in this theater. She was open to all of us. And it just went on from there. But that festival just blew my mind, and I just said, "I'm coming back." And I say, "I gotta bring— I know people that really would be interested in seeing this."

And then we went back again. I went to Santiago a couple times and I studied. I took classes with Cutumba who I had met here. Because Laurence

³² For an account of how Peache brought the aña drums to Philadelphia, see Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 190-194.

[Salzmann] had brought Cutumba here and they needed dancers. So he asked me could Kulu Mele work with them, and I said “Of course!” That was an opportunity for us to get a chance to work with Cutumba. I met them. They was very nice to us. They were surprised of how we picked up so well. Because from me studying with the Cubans and all. **Everything I learned I brought back to the group.** And so we worked with Cutumba here.

Trying to keep it going on

Wilk: [What’s important?] Me, I think it’s the excellence. The performance. Keeping the music pure. Pure as you can.

Dottie: Right. Traditional. Trying to stick with the tradition. Even though I stay open to new stuff. That’s why I let hip-hop come in.

Wilk: Keep our culture along with the other cultures. I’m still learning. I only know so much. There’s a guy that comes here. That come to my house. He really knows. He be teaching me. Teaching us.

Dottie: **There’s always something to learn.**

Wilk: Oh no, **we just scratched the surface!** Just scratched the surface of it.

Dottie: I look at how things are so plentiful now for people that’s studying African dancing and drumming and the culture. Like it’s so much for them here. It’s like on a platter for them. Where we had to strain to get to study. Or travel. So. It’s plentiful. There’s a lot of classes here now.

Wilk: Cubans are here. Africans are here.

Dottie: Yeah. When we was coming up, they weren’t here.

Wilk: We had to catch three busses to get out West Philly to go to Bob’s. You know what I mean?

We had to get the 33, the El and walk through the park. For years.

Dottie: For years! We was rehearsing like three times a week. For years. And we just look at how **Kulu Mele was like a revolving door.** How since we been there, how people come in and stay for awhile and then leave and then another patch come in and stay for a while and leave. And it just keeps going. And I’m trying to keep it going on, too. I’m just looking at how the little kids— The children, I used to teach them. I didn’t charge anything. I just taught the kids because I wanted to build a children’s company. So I always would teach them. I never made any money. When they need costumes, I used whatever money I could get. But now, where Omo Kulu Mele is like kind of holding its own. Like we don’t make any money as Kulu Mele. But it’s holding it own. Like the children are paying for the class, they are paying for the instructor. They are paying for the space. So I’m liking how that’s becoming. That’s a great step.

Wilk: Even the drummers getting their little something.

Dottie: Right.

Wilk: I never got nothing. Never!

Dottie: I always have dreams. **I keep dreaming.**

Trying to make ‘em come true.

Dottie: [Remember] when I did Ogun and Oshun at AR [African Rhythms]? With Jeffrey?

Wilk: You did that with Jeffrey?

Dottie: Mmmhmm. Paul was the drummer for it. You probably was on that show. You probably— He was helping Paul Lucas with the drumming for that, Orisha stuff.

Wilk: Ten years. Ten years. I was helping for ten years!

Dottie: Oh, he says he was helping for ten years. Ten years without getting paid, right?

Wilk: (Laughing!) Yep. Yep. Without getting paid.

Dottie: Just donating his time!

Wilk: I got paid in another type of way. We had girls coming from AR. It was like a feeder system. Between AR and Kulu Mele. If they didn't leave town, they [swishes one hand past another to signify siding right over.]

Dottie: Paul Lucas asked me to come in. He was working there and he called me and asked me, "Would I—" Because he wanted to do Orisha dancing. They was just doing West African, like djembe stuff. And he said, like "Come in—" Because he knew I was teaching it at Lee Cultural Center. He asked me would I take the job. And that's how I got in there. And I did that for almost 10 years. [And then I passed it] over to Ama. She's been doing it for four or five years now.

Dottie: It's a great history. We made history all right though. We done paved the way for a lot of people, so If we don't make it, we have done something here. They'll remember Kulu Mele. They'll remember Dorothy Wilkie, John Wilkie.

Wilk: You think so?

Dottie: It is social change. It really is. We paved the way for people. Arthur Hall, you know, people like him. Miss Nash. Kulu Mele. We paved the way for what is on the platter for them right now.

Wilk: Yep. And they go [to] the internet!

Dottie: Oh, you can go on the internet! If I had that back then— Oh, my God you can go and study all kinds of stuff on the internet!

Wilk: Picture having that when we were young!

Dottie: Yes!!

Wilk: We'd have been super, super, super sharp!



Saka stands with "The Drummer," his sculpture of Baba Crowder, Accra, Ghana, 1995. Photo courtesy John Wilkie.

Saka Acquaye (1923–2007) was a legendary Ghanaian sculptor, artist, musician, dramatist, cultural force (and track star). He came to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to study art (1953–1956). Here and in his native Ghana, Saka worked in many media, circulated local and cosmopolitan cultural practices, and actively shaped anti- and post-colonial forms. (Ghana became independent in 1957). Saka recruited local African American drummers and dancers at Judimar

School of Dance where Baba and others were drumming for interpretive and Dunham classes. He began a performing ensemble including drummers (George Brooks, Bobby Crowder, Garvin Masseaux, Charles Jones, William Roberts, Richard Smith) and dancers (Arthur Hall, Ione Nash, Joan A. Hill, Vivienne Certaine, Lee Fennell, George Williams, Curtis White, Eugene Boyer, Edward Spivey, Gail McDougal, and Barbara Dozier).

He started an 11-piece band featuring local African American musicians and some Ghanaian kin: Crowder, Masseaux, George Brooks, Edward Cooper, Wilfred Letman, Charles Earland, Walter Miller, Joseph Acquaye, Benny Parkes and Sonny Morgan. They recorded an album, *Gold Coast Saturday Night* on Elektra c. 1956–9. The album was recorded before Olatunji's *Drums of Passion* (released 1960), which sold in the millions and generally gets credited for sparking interest in African music. But Saka had to return to Ghana for a brother's funeral and his album's release was delayed. The record of highlife music has nonetheless circulated widely and some of the pieces on it were early Kulu Mele repertoire. Doc Gibbs says that Saka's album had the better musicians. By the 1960s, Philadelphia drummers were already legendary. Saka alumni Arthur Hall, Ione Nash and Robert Crowder each went on to establish important Philadelphia African dance and drum legacies, carrying the torch. Dottie says "[T]hey just took different roads. [They each] laid down some cultural stuff here in the city." See Doc Gibbs and others' recollections in "Honoring Ancestors." Also see "Acquaye's Dancers in Second Concert," Prigmore, "African Cultural Event," "Sculpture, drums and peanut butter," Nii-Dortey, "Folk Opera," Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers*, 37–38, 180–181, and Metzger, *Life in the Banyan*, 153–178.



Arthur Hall is Obatala, with his company. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1995.

Arthur Hall (1934–2000) was one of the original members of Saka Acquaye's West African Cultural Society, along with Ione Nash (his long-time dance partner), and Robert Crowder. Visionary, dancer, choreographer, teacher and cultural worker, Arthur founded a dance company as well as "the first community art center in America to be established by a dance company" in 1969: the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center on Germantown Avenue in North Philadelphia. In 1972, when Arthur established the Ile Ife Museum of African Art, scholar Robert Farris Thompson said that "the Africanist center of America moved from Katherine Dunham's school in New York to Ile Ife in Philadelphia." Alumni of the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble (1970s–1988) are a who's who of dance, drum and culture in Philadelphia and beyond. See Williams, Arthur Hall Collection, Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble's *Ile Ife*, Wallace, *50 Years* and Lautin, *The Street and the Elite*.



Ione Nash and her company, Ione Nash Dance Ensemble, and the Skip Burton Heritage Drummers. Photo courtesy Ione Nash and Skip Burton, 1999.

Ione Nash (b. 1923->) In the late 1950s, Ms. Nash was one of ten dancers in Saka Acquaye's ensemble. She remembers that he was strict and wanted to be sure you were paying attention in class. She appreciated this. In the '60s, she partnered dancer Arthur Hall in his dances. Around 1959-1960, when she opened her own dance school in the 5800 block of Germantown Avenue, she was the first African American to open a business on that street. The people in the building across the street complained about the drumming and she had to go to court to keep the right for her drummers to play for classes and rehearsals. She moved the music to the back of the building to try to placate the neighbors. Around the same time, Ms. Nash founded her own company, the Ione Nash Dance Ensemble (INDE). The company existed in different versions, including, for many years, in conjunction with the Skip Burton Heritage Drummers. Ms. Nash has choreographed more than 600 dances.



Jaasu Ballet, Africamericas festival. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1989.

Jaasu Ballet (1985—1990) was created in 1985 out of conversations between Darryl Burgee, Steve Jackson and Arthur Driscoll. Performances feature master drummers (John Wilkie, Robert Crowder, Steve Jackson and Darryl Burgee), veteran dancers (Oyin Renee Harris, Dorothy Wilkie, Sandy Pugh, and Wilhemina Fisher), and stilt walkers (Arthur Driscoll and Vernon Forrest). Darryl Burgee, who directed the dance and music for the group, studied under such teachers as Arthur Hall, William Powell,

Ferrell Johnson, Niaye, and Saw Paw of Ghana. Most of the dances in Jaasu's repertoire originated in West Africa, Senegal, Gambia and Guinea and several choreographers contributed to the group's growth and development. Jackie Corley, one of the group's first dance teachers and choreographers, taught Jaasu members the Senegalese dances "Waulausadong" and "Lamba." Immanaye Payne, artistic director of Muntu African dance company of Chicago, taught the group more contemporary movements of the "Lamba" tradition. James Marshall choreographed and taught dances (like "Guinea Harvest" and "Celebration") he had learned in Arthur Hall's Afro-American Dance and Drum Ensemble. Mohammed Camara of Guinea added a version of "Kou Kou," a Malinke hunter's dance, to Jaasu Ballet's repertoire, teaching the forty-five-minute ballet and rhythms to the dancers and drummers. This piece premiered at the Painted Bride in about 1990 as part of a performance of Philadanco's Black Dance Conference concert sponsored by Joan Myers Brown.—Benita Brown [adapted from *African Diaspora Movement Arts in Philadelphia*, pp. 15-16]



Peaché pours libation, ODUNDE. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, c. 1990.

Clifford Gregory "Peaché" Jarman (1947–2009)

was Baba Crowder's first student and an early and important member of Kulu Mele. Peaché began playing the conga in 1954, when he was seven, studying with Baba Crowder and Garvin Masseaux for many years. In the 1960s, Peaché played with many local Latin bands in Philadelphia. He was music director and teacher for Arthur Hall's African dance ensemble (c. 1968–1979). He went to Los Angeles during the peak years of African Cuban drum culture, where he studied and played with Mongo Santamaria, Francisco Aquabella and others in bands and olucumí ceremonies. He returned from California initiated in the religion, brought his expertise on batá drums and the religious culture surrounding them to Philadelphia and continued to develop the structure of batá drumming here. Peaché performed, toured and recorded with Mongo, Willie Bobo, Cal Tjader, Papa Ladji Camara, Julito Collazo, Steve Berrios, and others. In the 1980s, he also worked at Katherine Dunham School in East St. Louis along with master drummers Nana C.K. of Ghana, Mor Thiam of Senegal, and "La Rosa," a respected elder drummer from Cuba and one of Katherine Dunham's original drummers from the 1950s. Peaché played as a percussionist with Kulu Mele in the 1980s–1995 (and occasionally after that). He was an original member of Philadelphia's Traditional African American Drummers Society, a group dedicated to the preservation and continuation of African hand drumming in the city. Beginning around 1995, he was part of Spoken Hand Percussion Orchestra, a group consisting of four percussion ensembles: including Afro-Cuban (which Peaché himself led for a time). Peaché was deeply involved in the spiritual dimensions of the drum. He embraced the traditional faith of the Yoruba people. He was a priest of Yemoja. In June 2000, he was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts.

In 2000, he told Elizabeth Sayre, "Just imagine what we would know if the slave trade or holocaust hadn't happened. You learn about life through the drum. Because it takes you places that everybody can't go. Drummers tell me that in their home places in Puerto Rico and Africa they can walk where no one is allowed to go. And the same thing happens here in Philadelphia. If a drummer has a drum, he can go to forbidden lands, to places where other people can't go, and nothing will happen to him. I have been able to walk through different doors that were opened by those before me, and I have been able to set up shop. My dream is about keeping those doors open for drummers coming up after me; my dream is to make sure that those doors stay open for drummers after them. I have been privileged by the love, trust and teachings of master drummers: Robert Crowder, Mongo Santamaria, Craig Shinnery and many others. I am honored to work as a drummer, as a teacher, and to contribute my drumming to community festivals, sacred ceremonies, concert stages, family occasions and ceremonies. I will thank the spirit of the drum for my life for the rest of my life."—Peaché Jarman [From statement, and biographical materials compiled by Elizabeth Sayre, Philadelphia Folklore Project files]