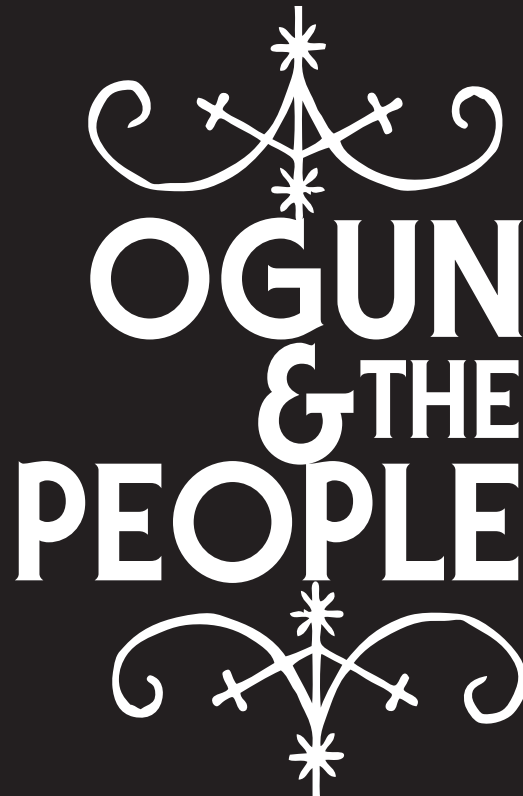


PART THREE
Kulu Mele's



Celebrating 50 Years
(1969–2019)

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

Compiled & edited by Debora Kodish

Designed by Ife Nii Owoo

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Feeling is Connected to Spirit

Reflections on Kulu Mele, African-centered cultural pedagogies, folk arts and social change, and Ogun & the People
Ira Bond, M.Ed.



There are times when the groove flows like Oshun's rivers, and there are other times when the groove is blocked as a river dam. You have to ride the river in space and time of the rhythm and groove. And to fall in that space and ride you have to let go, be inside, and internalize. If you are over-conscious, over-reactive, over-critical, or self-doubting then the groove is going to pass you, or you will create a block. The groove will elude you. This is very applicable to life, to ritual and spiritual dimensions, to transformation and change.

Baba Wilkie has spent his life learning the languages of the music that accompanies Orisha religion, symbolism and ways of life. Transatlantic enslavement and its Maafa is responsible for what we now call the African diaspora: the scattering of African people across our planet. Seeds that are scattered and planted can and do flourish, but as a result of their environments, they may take on differing characteristics. Kulu Mele's flourishing has taken place over more than fifty years of people experiencing folkloric preservation and interpretation in Philadelphia. The cultural traditions of the African diaspora have been fingerprinted with new practices that build on antecedents. People of the African diaspora developed social, cultural, music, dance and spiritual traditions from something—what Awo Facundo describes as a very sophisticated philosophical and practical nexus of survival (and thrival) skills. We have had—and continue to have—an advanced opportunity and responsibility to develop new ways of interpreting and cultivating an equilibrium. We find balance between tradition and interpretation, identity and adaptation, and ownership and internalization. Ogun & the People (O&tP) seeks and collectively retrieves these balances. It is what Mama Dottie

and Baba Wilk call “carrying the torch for culture,” what Danys La Mora Perez calls conscientization, or what I might call liberation folklore.

My Role

As an educator, custodian of culture, musician, and Kulu Mele company member, I exercise many dimensionalities of my practice in recognizing and supporting authentic feedback and reflection. My role in O&P was **emergent**: it required taking account of space and time needed for shaping meaningful processes. My role was **collaborative**. There is no “I” in Africa. “We are a team,” Ama Schley says, speaking for us all. Ama is Kulu Mele’s dance captain and more than second generation here. My role helped facilitate a **safe space**. A **non-judgemental** climate is needed for people to feel comfortable in learning work, safe in documenting progress, and open and honest in reflecting on learning. These things can’t happen without support within a facilitated environment.

One of my essential questions in this role has been, “How can I water the ground, encourage flowering, and cultivate a meaningful and reflective process?” There is a great responsibility in tending the ground for ritual practices, and being true to the essence of passed forward tradition. Tradition is extended, cultivated and recorded in the **call and response** gathered in this book and enacted in the family-ness that we share.

Drawing on cultural, artistic and educational **overstandings** to shape valid evaluation and assessment measures has been a goal and calling of mine as I interconnected within this project. To overstand is to “comprehend something, at a higher level than ordinarily perceived limits of understanding.”¹ The process of evaluation and assessment has to be as authentic and clear to the tradition as the finished artistic presentation. I made a conscious decision to be as true to the identity of the process as the finished product. This method links the mission and symbolism of Kulu Mele and its Africanity with how we evaluate our progress.

An African-Centered Learning Model

Western schools of thought around teaching and learning tend to center formative and summative assessments, performance rubrics, and standardized opportunities to test knowledge that are placed on a calendar. Test proficiency often prioritizes short term memory. African-centered learning practices focus on community progress as well as individualized learning goals. We take a holistic and long-term approach to internalizing information. African-centered standards also acknowledge social and emotional learning, and value life-long relationships built over time with trust and love.

Cutumba’s African-centered learning practices grounded us. Cutumba began by

¹ See the Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=overstand>.



Iwe (journals) created by Ira, and used by project participants.
Photos: Ife Nii Owoo.

reestablishing a relationship upon our arrival, acknowledging Orisha practices, showing love and concern for Kulu Mele and the work through multiple opportunities for communication, and then building off of that relationship with immersive and intense instructional practices that called on a variety of teaching and learning techniques. Cutumba's leadership recognizes the value of differentiated and naturally occurring markers of evidence.

At the outset, Cutumba performed O&tP, presenting the production to Kulu Mele. At the conclusion of the week, Kulu Mele performed O&tP for Cutumba. Notes were given to us on areas of improvement and successes. Love and encouragement was promoted. This was Cutumba's culturally valid and meaningful evaluation and assessment.

Vehicle, Vessel, Embodiment

To be a vehicle and vessel is central to what makes Kulu Mele so powerful as a performance company. A vehicle will move to the commands of its driver. A vessel's contents distinguish it. To be a vehicle and vessel you must have the ability to embody the vision of the choreographer/musician. In order to embody the vision of a work, you must be willing to be what is needed.

Cutumba choreographers and artists had a vision. As the vehicle and vessel, at the outset, we didn't know what it looked like. Despite all of our preparation, we didn't know where we were driving and had no idea of what our specific contents were going to be. Even as Cutumba presented O&tP to Kulu Mele we didn't really have a clue. We asked questions like, "Where am I going to be in it?" "How is it going to function?"

When we saw Cutumba perform O&tP, we were seeing it from the outside. We were witnessing it, but not practicing it, and not embodying it. Embodying is an active skill of internalization, developing powers of attention and observation, and then being, letting go, and feeling. Feeling is connected to spirit. Through this process and practice, Kulu Mele dancers come to embody the Orishas. Filled vehicle and vessel find their destinations and purpose.

One of the greatest choreographers and teachers I have ever had was the late Nii Yartey, master artist and choreographer of the National Ballet of Ghana. He would say, "You become the paint on my paintbrush," and "You have to be flexible and pliable. You have to be molded and embody what I want you to be." Embodiment is one way Kulu Mele becomes an excellent vehicle and sturdy vessel.

Kulu Mele Method: Seven Dimensions of Practicing African Folk Traditions

The Kulu Mele method of approaching art, tradition and ritual is a purposeful African-centered framework. I have observed seven dimensions for studying, presenting, approaching and embodying African folkloric traditions, noted in the Yoruba language of Nigeria, birthplace of the Orisha traditions:

1. Afrika ti dojuko: African-centeredness
2. Ero jin to ise ododo: Thought to action
3. Itan-oro: Community-driven memory
4. Bi ti aye: Rite of passage
5. Otito: Reflective processes
6. Ominira: Cultural liberation work
7. El Monumento al Cimarrón: Establishment of sacred space

1. **Afrika ti dojuko** is African-centeredness, embracing our African identity. We are charged to remain true to Africanity regardless of western (white supremacist) propaganda and misinformation about our continent. Afrika ti dojuko embodies Africanity as a foundation for self-determining identity in spaces where African identities may be considered negative and primitive. O&tP represents a philosophy that revolves around Afrika ti dojuko. For example, we take a pataki seriously as philosophical, moral, and culturally sophisticated tool, as Awo Facundo observes, a source of power and liberation.

Afrika ti dojuko contends that we have not arrived at this point by accident: we are standing on the shoulders of people who came before us. We represent the latest phase of the struggles and successes of our ancestors. There is wisdom to be embodied and enacted, reservoirs of practice accessible to us, encoded in these traditions into which we step. Embracing our ancestors, we are enacting a pathway. Afrika ti dojuko reminds us that to recognize excellence, we must search and actively claim our heritage. This is participatory practice, Mama Dottie's and Baba Wilk's reminiscences remind us.

2. **Ero jin to ise ododo** is thought to action in Yoruba. It is a way of engaging necessary deep cultural overstanding—ero jin, critical thinking and presence, reconsideration of the normalized—for the purpose of movement building, ise ododo, righteous action over time. It is “how we teach one another who we need to be in order to imagine and build freedom.”² Ero jin to ise ododo is the ancient idea of imagining and embodying change.

² From Grace Lee Boggs, and definitional practice at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School, where Kulu Mele was founding and longtime folk arts residency teaching ensemble. See Boggs, *Next American Revolution*, and Kodish, “Notes.”

Consider the idea of returning to a foundational source guided and searching for truth. This type of voyage requires courage and compassion, the ability to be humble and a good student. Baba Wilk and Mama Dottie share stories of fifty years of diving deep, researching and connecting elements, painstakingly retrieving and piecing together—and doing this at first with just a few others in their own and earlier generations. The movement has grown over time, always requiring critical thinking and presence.

Our righteous action is this movement and moment: the sharing of a transformative juncture in Kulu Mele's existence. This was Kulu Mele's experience in Santiago: we traveled purposefully in search of what knowledgeable sources could teach us about O&tP, tradition, history and ourselves. Decompartmentalization, decolonization, identifying mental and generational bondage, including enslavement, were among the areas of concern and transition. Kulu Mele's purpose (*ero jin*) has been in search of the truth about our diaspora and lineage identities. Our action (*ise ododo*) is to bring back and share these gifts with more communities that they might benefit from these truths.

3. **Itan-oro** is community-driven memory. Itan-oro is ourstory, critical folklore pedagogy, grassroots learning, and wisdom reactivated. We embrace teaching and learning that challenges history, white domination, sexism and other forms of singular interpretations of our identity. We embrace critically valuing traditional beliefs, ourstory, and stories of a community touched through generations of interpretations by our ancestors. To practice itan-oro, we must be open to the significant reorientation embodied by diverse community belief systems and be willing to facilitate critical thinking and feeling in spaces that activate traditional folktales, jeli/griot evidence, and eldership perspectives.

The pataki of O&tP is a practice of itan-oro. Awo Facundo reminds us that the pataki is a tool for visioning and a means of staying alive and withstanding. He said, "When you talk about folklore, you are talking about a belief and philosophical system which is sophisticated." Folklore is something "very substantial" that people have to hold onto in order to undergo changes. Folklore is "something real. Very real." Folklore, collective wisdom, artifacts and patakis are all ways in which we reach ourstory. We build off of our grounding to envision a better future.

4. **Bi ti aye** is rite of passage. The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria are fluent in the transformative power enabled within ritual. Skilled practitioners—diviners, maskers, musicians, dancers and elders—advance the transformation of individuals to higher levels of self-identification and realization. When we think of ritual as a means to the transformation and elevation of social status, we must also acknowledge rites of passage as ancient systems of education and efflorescence.

A rite of passage marks a significant stage of growth taking place in a person's life.

This experience ushers in a new way of doing and being and helps to clarify one's life calling or purpose. These intense educational and life experiences help guide people to an enlightened state of awareness about their personal powers and indwelling strengths. The rite of passage journey involves dying to one's old self, entering into the unknown, and returning to take a new life or direction. In this metamorphic journey from an old to new life, there is a symbolic death that occurs when the initiate transforms and embraces a calling that leads to new privileges and responsibilities. These stages of growth, whether through formal or informal experiences, take people through a series of challenges where a person emerges wiser, stronger, more purpose-driven and resilient.

Learning O&tP has been a rite of passage experience for Kulu Mele members. The embodiment of the pataki, and the energies of the Orisha created a transitional space in which Kulu Mele is different. Living in this space, Kulu Mele minds, hearts, and spirits opened in new ways. Stepping on the other side through a sacred ritual creates a space of clarity and focus. This rite of passage continues to live in all who have been involved and been blessed with our pilgrimage to Cuba.

O&tP is not narrowly constructed, art for art's sake, forced or appropriated work. This work has been developed deliberately, challenges perceptions, carries intercultural meaning, for the purposes of deep community transformation. When you experience O&tP you enter the ritual, face the conflict head on, and return as Ogun, transformed as his people with an elevated and new understanding about life.

5. **Ottito** is reflective process. Ottito is reflection in Yoruba. It is re-sensation: processing with your multiple senses what is occurring. Colors, names, smells, language, people working, sweating and living together, in the heat. Time out of time, space out of space, time in space, space in space. Liminal experiences that you are betwixt and between all need processing with deep ottito. Listening to one another's journey whilst witnessing and vibrating collectively in a co-created sacred space is ottito. And a lot to think about. There were several ways in which I supported our ottito.

Iwe are sacred books and one of our most effective forms of ottito. The iwe was a journal kept by each Kulu Mele company member. The iwe represented a sacred space where people could document their experience in the manner they preferred. People could write, scrapbook, sign, or journal. Each iwe was dedicated to a different Orisha. Kulu Mele members chose the Orisha that resonated for them as they began their pilgrimage through Santiago. During and after our stay, company members took time reading and sharing reflections from the iwe, which also proved to be a powerful reflective tool.³

Call and response is a reflective process: a way we show ourselves to ourselves. We used call and response processes to learn new material together. Call and response

³ Some Kulu Mele members read from their iwe in "We went to Cuba."

is a fundamental educational African technology. It is present in the music, dance and culture of the people. The call is usually expertise, teaching, direction and new information to be processed. The response is learner's voice, interpretation (not imitation) of the new information. When Kulu Mele dances down the floor, or in ensemble, sings Orisha songs or plays the intricate rhythms of the batá drum, there is always a call and response, or conversation that is being made.

On a larger scale, call and response got us here: we entered into this project knowing that Kulu Mele and this pataki are collectively held. We sent the call and received responses, interpretations and reflections. Each reflection is important as we are not dictating a message but reflecting from a movement and moment. This book represents the movement and moment of more than fifty voices for fifty years of Kulu Mele cultural arts excellence.

Technology and Recording. Kulu Mele members and the project team made meticulous video and recordings with Cutumba for archival and future reference. Videos documented dancing and movement techniques of the Orisha, choreography, and the development and learning process of the pataki as Kulu Mele learned. These recordings were uploaded to a central location for the entire dance and production company to access. Company members who were not able to go were able to benefit from the impressive documentation. Documentation helped review and refresh memory, and encouraged reflection on process and practice.

Collective Storytelling. Aidan Un, project videographer, created and shared back beautiful videos of the project. His compelling work evokes feeling. Every time Kulu Mele and community members watch, we are returned to Santiago, and moved to tears. Selina Morales, project folklorist and translator, grew up with images of Yemaya in her family home in Puerto Rico. During the journey, Selina questioned, reflected, processed and learned with adaptation and cultural sensitivity. Our guide to the Santiago experience was Danys La Mora Perez, a skilled ritualist and reflective practitioner of Santeria. La Mora shaped our ritual process and coordinated a well-planned and orchestrated cultural experience. All of this added up to multiple highly reflexive and meta-cognitive collective ethnographic endeavors that continue to resonate.

6. **Ominira** is cultural liberation work. The ideas of freedom and independence are complex. Thoughts can become braces. Braces can become bars, held into place by years of habit, structure, and indoctrination. There are many paths to freedom. Our project includes liberation cultural work: starting with the aspiration to disconnect braces and bars. Liberation cultural work builds on our freedom practices, calling us to experience and take in, pay attention and feel. Feeling is connected to spirit.

“All of these patakis are meant to be interpreted allegorically,” Awo Facundo teaches. “The more you look at it, the more you see.” “Your senses help you fine tune your

understanding.” As a pedagogical and visioning tool, a pataki like O&tP is a traditional perspicacity practice. It is a means for people to develop vision, insightfulness, the ability to perceive and be liberated. Living with O&tP continues to fine tune our understandings, yield insights, build our power and freedom.

As members of the Philadelphia community, we know our ancestors faced challenges to celebrate art within this continuum. There was a time when we couldn’t play drums in the park without fear of police recourse. Our community bravely and forcefully created concrete spaces, institutions and lineages that were emancipated: Kulu Mele, Ile Ife, and others. Kulu Mele’s fifty years, and this project, have been essential in supporting the fight to play, dance, learn and enact our Africanity.

7. El Monumento al Cimarrón represents the establishment of sacred space. El Monumento al Cimarrón is a towering sculpture created of bronze and iron on a hill near the town of El Cobre, outside Santiago. It remembers and honors maroons: enslaved people who took their own freedom in one of the earliest revolts that took place in Cuba. Visiting this site (and others) on our journey, Kulu Mele felt the places that enslaved and free Africans, embodied, interconnected, realized power, and created sacred space in a new land. We bring that feeling forward and ask: “How do we find our sacred space here, in the midst of western chaos and confusion?” How do we live in freedom, power and justice? We face some of the same challenges of our ancestors.

It should be recognized that Kulu Mele (and the pataki) redefine time and place (today-1600s) so that transformation and change work can happen. Change work takes place in safe sacred spaces. People can do that by entering into the pataki: the work of the metaphor. Carrying the torch for culture.

Sacred time and space continuum don’t always exist in brick and mortar spaces. Our iwes became sacred spaces, holding important experiences, cultivating a tradition of paying attention, documenting and recording. Sharing invited Kulu Mele to return to sacred space: Re-articulating important moments while sharing in collective embodiment. Reflecting on our own documentation.

It is our calling to create sacred space in the minds of initiates, audiences, and communities in the places where we impart knowledge, in environments that we can climate control, for the betterment of the ritual and its transformative mission.

Fitting to O&tP, the monument structure of iron, bronze, metal and stone stands on a nganga, a word borrowed from the Regla de Palo Monte, Afro-Cuban religion. It means metal pot—in this case, one containing sticks, stones, metals and bones in which practitioners of the religion place their offerings. Could this also be where Ogun stored his technology when he decided to leave the people? What a sacred space and treasure we have found!

Final Thoughts

Kulu means voice, and Mele means ancestors, drawing from the rich legacy of our diaspora and the Guro language of the Ivory Coast. We ask these questions, “What if our ancestors spoke? What would they say? What would be the messages?” Our ancestors lived full lives with many life experiences. As elders, in African perspective, they would sacrifice to bring those who will come after, their ascendants, a higher level of opportunity. This is our life call and response. We live as a call for our children to be better, more loved and free. Their response is to make us proud and carry on our legacy.

We feel and remember the call of our ancestors whose experiences equate to wisdom and the righteous application of knowledge, and as our response to them, we live in the same space, connecting and corresponding. Named and unknown, our African reality would tell us that our ancestors would reflect their overstandings to us, their children, in preparation for a brighter future. This is Kulu Mele ‘s fifty years, acknowledging the legacy of the call from Baba Robert Crowder and others, responding to that call within O&tP and the now of Kulu Mele, and by us repeating that call to the future while awaiting their response and the continuation of African folk art legacy for another fifty years of Kulu Mele practice and excellence.

Feeling is connected to spirit. It is sometimes undefinable. That is OK. It can hit us to our core of who we think we are, but it might not strike us all at the same time. That is fine also. What we feel is connected to who we are. Who is Oshun to you? Who is Ogun? These are personal questions that only you can define.

“They showed me who I am.” This is what Kulu Mele people are saying in this book. When you are recognized, when you recognize yourself, you feel validated, powerful and empowered. Ama Schley says, “What we have been doing is real!” We are more connected than we actually thought we were. We are learning new things, but those rhythms have always been with us. They are familiar and are part of who we are. We are reliving it, retrieving and awakening it, but it has always been there. So our feeling is our spirit, and our spirit is Africa. Africa is not some faraway place. Africa is within me.

Some call and response

What does Kulu Mele mean to you?

What does Ogun & the People mean to you?

How is this story relevant to you and to today?

What teaching, learnings, wisdom do you find?

Kulu Mele is the grandmother of traditional African dance in Philadelphia.—Dr. Benita Brown

I would like to thank Baba Crowder, Dottie Wilkie and John Wilkie for asking me all those years ago to travel on what became an Amazing Journey. I was a principal dancer with Kulu Mele for 19 years. I was there before all of this. I was there when we practiced all year and made \$40 at ODUNDE. We were making no money at all. It was just for the love of it. I love the dance and I loved being part of Kulu Mele. Back then it was Dottie, myself and Binta. And for years it was just us three. We worked together for a long time. They pulled me into the company and taught me Afro-Cuban. And then from there, the West African. I have many, many, many memories in the company. I went the first time they ever went to Cuba, myself and Okikilu. So many wonderful things happened and I'll always appreciate being a part of Kulu Mele. Kulu Mele helped me put my foot in the door, for sure. They helped me to be introduced to so many beautiful things. Keep rising, Kulu Mele. I thank you for the opportunity of being a part of you for such a long time. I thank you for the friendships that I've made. Continue to rise to the highest level of artistic creativity.—Renee "Oyin" Harris-Hardy

The experience I had in studying and performing inside of Kulu Mele allowed me to hone even further my skills in teaching dance, and to more directly connect with Orisha culture. I began to see myself as a choreographer. Kulu Mele is a beacon of excellence in African Dance & Drumming Traditions.—Angela Watson

I have so many memories. It was an honor and privilege to know and perform with Baba Crowder Ibikunle. When we was at BAM we talked so much about the things that he wanted to keep in the company. Baba's dream was Kulu Mele and to keep it alive with respect. We laughed. He took drumming seriously and lived by it. I learned a lot under his tutelage. Baba and I had a special relationship because of our belief in the Creator. He loved the way the company clothing looked onstage and during performances. He wanted us always to look like a professional company, and for our clothes to look Good. He said he was very appreciative of the seamstress—the way that Stephanie Amma designed the clothes. He always talked about the respect that we had and wanted to keep it in the Company. He was my friend and always will be a friend, a close friend of mine. I Pray the Creator will continue to Bless Him. He is Definitely MISSED. La La N LaLa Mohamad Do A Asu Allah.—Baba Ishmael Jackson

Kulu Mele is a clear example of African centered work with a clear artistic vision of excellence, cultural competency and precision. Kulu Mele represents what is possible for community with focus, perseverance and a deep sense of commitment to ensuring traditions are preserved and shared. It represents hope, courage, excellence and authenticity. I think the trajectory of Kulu Mele is a continued commitment to growing and establishing its long legacy: a legacy not just defined by years of existence but the deep thinking, creative ambitions and tradition bearing that has been established. I am so proud to have been a part of the process with having led the first major grant from the William Penn Foundation to conduct the first strategic plan which led to hiring their first Managing Director. All with the goal of working in tandem with the leadership to ensuring that the capacity of the organization matched its big artistic vision!—Ayoka Wiles

Mama Doffie encouraged me to join Kulu Mele in 2005. She was my first African dance teacher at Penn and I admire her grace and poise as a leader and a dancer then and now. Nearly 14 years later, I am beyond honored to perform with this incredible company for the 50th anniversary show. This company has helped me to grow in innumerable ways as an artist, singer, and dancer. Appreciating the traditions and history behind the music and dance gives it a richness and importance that is indescribable. Kulu Mele is truly a family and I hope to see it last for another amazing 50 years and beyond.
—Danielle Bourget Simon

Voices of our Ancestors: A treasure in the world of cultural preservation through education and presentation. Kulu Mele: conveyance of the past to present and into the future. Long live the love and commitment.—Baba Paul Lucas Ogun Leri

Kulu Mele is my escape to a magical place. Dancing with legendary dancers to the music of legendary drummers fills my soul and nourishes my spirit. I feel so honored and fortunate to be a part of this company. I am forever grateful to Mama Dottie and Baba Wilkie for keeping it going. I hope for the sake of our children that It will keep going strong for another 50 years and beyond.—Kia Holifield Wimmer

As a member of Kulu Mele for the last 10 years it's been a beautiful backdrop to my life. Kulu Mele and its members are family! Kulu has been here for my wedding, my births (while dancing), career changes, buying a home and everything in between, so to be present for the 50th year is a major blessing and to do it in Ogun and the People deepens the blessing. To participate in showcasing the beauty and power of Orisha dance adds to the amazing nature of this experience. I am forever grateful for Mama Dottie, Papa Wilkie and all of the Kulu Mele Elders who have paved the way! Mafererefun Elegba, Oshun, Ogun and All Orisha!—Alakee Bethea-Fairchild

Kulu Mele helped me realize where I needed to be in life when it came to my dance career. The company gave me a professional outlook to the dance world, the business that's comes with it & opened my eyes to so many different things.

Just to think I was brought on as just a HipHop dancer in '06-'07 to now being officially one of the male dancers of the company gives my heart joy every day. I appreciate Mama Dottie & Baba Wilk to the highest extent for believing in me. I appreciate my brother Ali for having such a beautiful family & I appreciate the whole company for being more than just a company. We are Family. We laugh together. We cry together. We even sometimes argue together, but at the end of the day we come together as one company and tear ISHHHHHH Down!!!! It's been 50 years & with such beautiful people involved in the company you better believe another 50 will be attached to this historic milestone!—Bryant Lee

Kulu Mele is no ordinary dance company. Most dance companies' practice include: discipline, technique, body strengthening, choreography and drama. Kulu Mele does also. What's different is the spiritual dimension that Baba, Dottie, John, Kenny and Ishmael became sensitive to and hearing from our ancestors and God. Pausing to Praise God is wisdom to put all things in prayer. Symbolically, rhythmically, and harmoniously. The Directors, founding members and committed partners lead the company in a greater notion that faith without works is dead and the works by Kulu Mele are alive. As cultural and spiritual practitioners we know that the life we breathe is not our own, Kulu Mele is driven by a higher order than man and that's why the company is still standing for 50 years. For some of us who live as traditional folk artists our beginnings started with learning sacred dances and music. Learning what dances and drum rhythms went together that are sacred, social, celebratory, rites, ceremonies, fetish, harvest etc. All mandatory. I've been on the same journey across town with Arthur Hall. Amazingly, Baba Crowder played drums for us at Arthur's Ile lfe. When he played the heavens opened and it was Spiritual Enjoyment on the dance floor. I loved when Baba would stop by to play for our rehearsals and performances. OMG, what a time we had. Kulu Mele founders launched their commitment as Cultural Guardians over 50 years ago to present excellence in training and staging African Dance and Drum. Ashe O!— Stephanie Amma Young

Dorothy and John Wilkie are the living definition of "Commitment to the Culture." They will celebrate 50 years of service in 2019. Let's make sure this institution is around another 50 years. #supportblackart #africandance #cuba #africa #philly #legacy #familypride #rest in power Baba Crowder.—Vena Jefferson

I am exceedingly proud of Kulu Mele and my family!—Carol Butcher

Kulu Mele changed my life and kept me out of trouble and off the streets. Kulu Mele is a life style. U live it. And it doesn't just mean something to me: it is me.— Ali Wilkie