Kulu Mele celebrates 50th anniversary

Oldest African dance & drum ensemble in the nation

By Marilyn Kai Jewett

Philadelphia’s Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble is observing its 50th anniversary with the release of its new commemorative book, “Kulu Mele’s Ogung & the People: Celebrating 50 Years (1969-2019),” at a book launch reception 6 p.m., Friday, October 18, at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, 7th and Arch streets. The world premiere of their new spellbinding production, “Ogun & the People,” is 8 p.m., Saturday, November 30, at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts’ Zellerbach Hall, 3680 Walnut St., Philadelphia. Founded in 1969 by legendary drummer Baba Robert “Ibikunle” Crowder (1930—2012), the dynamic ensemble is the oldest, continually-performing African dance and drum ensemble in the nation.

Under Crowder’s expert tutelage, the ensemble has continued the traditions of iconic dancer/choreographers Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham by performing authentic dances of Africa and its Diaspora, and became a major part of the foundation of Philadelphia’s Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Kulu Mele (translated as “voice of our ancestors”) helped give birth to a cultural renaissance in Philadelphia’s African-American communities and attracted those who were eager to study and experience African culture through the performing arts. Scores of dancers and drummers were trained by Crowder at his longtime headquarters in West Philadelphia’s Lee Cultural Center.

“Ogun & the People” was commissioned by the Annenberg with major support from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. The production explores a pataki (sacred parable) of the Yoruba deity Ogun — warrior, protector, dispenser of justice who brought civilization to the world — and the effect on the people when he leaves the village and retreats into the forest. The support from the pew Center for Arts & Heritage allowed Kulu Mle to visit Santiago, Cuba to study the dance, music and spiritual traditions that form the basis of the story, with world-renowned Ballet Folklorico Cuumba in order to develop the full-length production.

“This trip was a long time in the making,” said artistic director, Dorothy “Mama Dottie” Wilkie, who along with her husband, music director, John “Wilk” Wilkie, have been with Kulu Mle since 1971. “I always dreamed of taking the group to Cuba but didn’t know how I was going to do it,” she said. “It took years of planning and thinking and then one day it hit me that we should go there and study with Cuumba, like we went to Africa and studied a play with Les Ballets Africains.”

Her vision for the production has been realized just as she visualized it said Mama Dottie. “It’s one of my favorite pataki about Ogun and Oshun, how he got angry, went into the forest and the whole community just went down,” she said. “You know Ogun is the creator of minerals and iron. When he went into the forest everything we need to survive just stopped. Developing this production with Cuumba is everything I envisioned and more. People are going to love this performance!”

Kulu Mle has expanded its repertoire to include the musical and movement genres of Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, Nigeria, Guinea, Ghana and the Senegambia region, as well as African-American art forms like hip-hop, the Bop, Cha-cha and the Slop. Through the direction of the Wilkies, engaging performances vividly convey the meaning of dancing and drumming in the African and African Diaspora societies from which these traditions originated. Over the years the husband and wife team traveled with Cuumba to Guinea, Senegal, Ghana and Cuba to study the traditional dance and drum art forms that the group performs.

As keepers of the culture, the Wilkies continue Crowder’s legacy of advancing African culture by training and mentoring dancers and drummers so the culture will be preserved for future generations. Kulu Mle offers an arts education program for children and classes for adults.

“In the years to come, we want Kulu Mle to be known as one of the groups that passed the torch for the culture,” said Mama Dottie. “We want people to know that we sacrificed our lives to the culture. We kept the culture going. Kulu Mele truly is the voice of our ancestors.”

“The young people have their culture,” added Wilk. “We just want them to know that this is part of your culture, too.”

The fruit of our African ancestors’ dreams — Kulu Mle continues to keep the culture alive for future generations and serves as an educational vehicle and source of outstanding entertainment for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

To RSVP for the book launch reception email kulumele.org. Tickets for “Ogun & the People” are selling fast and may be purchased online at kulumele.org or (https://annenbergcenter.org/event/kulu-mele-african-dance-drum-ensemble), by phone at 215-898-3900 or the Annenberg box office. For information on a 25% discount for groups of 10 or more call 215-573-8827.