Kùlú Mélè commemorative book launch, come celebrate 50 years of African American cultural history

Philadelphia’s Kùlú Mélè African Dance & Drum Ensemble invites the community to come celebrate its 50th Anniversary with the release its new commemorative book, “Kulu Mele’s Ogun & the People: Celebrating 50 Years (1969-2019),” at a book launch reception 6:00pm, Friday, October 18 at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, 7th & Arch Streets. The launch also includes “The Story of Ogun & the People,” a coloring book for all ages illustrated by artist Damali Beatty which is based on photographs of Kùlú Mélè’s trip to Cuba. 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. Kùlú Mélè (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.

The limited edition book allows readers to experience the history of Kùlú Mélè and its role in Philadelphia’s Black Arts Movement. The book also documents the ensemble’s historic visit to Santiago, Cuba to study dance, music and Yoruba spiritual traditions with world-renowned Ballet Folklorico Cutumba in preparation for the full-length production of the world premiere of their new spellbinding production “Ogun & the People -- An ancient story with lessons for today’s world,” that will be presented November 30, at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. “Ogun & the People” explores a pataki (a sacred parable/moral tale of the Yoruba tradition) 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 feeling unappreciated.

The history is told in three parts: The first story in the book is the history of the evolution of the ensemble and how it embraced African and African Diaspora dance, drum, and folkloric traditions told through the words of Kùlú Mélè Artistic Director Dorothy “Mama Dottie” Wilkie and Music Director Baba John Wilkie -- partners in culture and life for nearly 60 years, who have been with the ensemble since 1971 and dedicated their lives to preserving the culture. Their story expresses the collective self-determination, the long-haul persistence and labors of love that sustained and empowered Kùlú Mélè as the...
Kùlú Mèlé

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foundation of a deep cultural movement. The second story in the book is the experiences of the ensemble’s members during the weeklong cultural immersion residency with Ballet Folkloríco Cutumba in Santiago, Cuba. The third story is community members’ reflections on the importance of the Ogun pataki in these modern times and the significance of Kùlú Mèlé’s historic cultural contributions.

The Kùlú Mèlé story begins with Crowder’s transformative journey into the world of music from to playing wooden cheese boxes as a child, his immersion into Cuban, Haitian, Brazilian and African music circles and traditions, performing African dance and drumming with the highly influential Ghanaian drummer Saka Acquaye in the 1950s, playing with jazz artists McCoy Tyner and John Coltrane, being the one of first African American drummers in Philadelphia to study batà drumming and sacred Orisa music, to the founding of Kùlú Mèlé in 1969.

The book includes interviews with the renowned Crowder before his transition in 2012. In this excerpt he recalls meeting Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana who matriculated at Lincoln University, in North Philadelphia.:

“These were heady times, Baba recalled, “In 1959 or 1960 there was a street festival for Ghana’s Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah at Broad and Diamond, when he went back to Ghana to take over. Kwame Nkrumah talked about his pride in African Americans—especially me, Saka and Garvin Masseaux. He said that he was very proud of Saka for enlightening the African American. When he spoke about freedom and awareness, everyone knew that day what the drums were saying. African Americans should come into awareness and go into their culture. Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah said that Africa to us is at the pit of our navel because we were snatched from Africa. But the child will return: Omowale.”

More than 50 community voices also contributed to the Kùlú Mèlé story: “Kulu Mélè is the grandmother of traditional African dance in Philadelphia.” -- Dr. Benita Binta Brown, former Kulu Mélè dancer and scholar

“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, dancer, storyteller and teacher

Don’t miss the opportunity to partake of the Ogun & the People Experience and cultural history in the making by attending the book launch and celebrating one of the nation’s cultural treasures! The book launch is free to the public. To RSVP email kulumele@kulumele.org. For information on purchasing copies of the limited edition book, the coloring book and tickets to the November 30 world premiere go to www.kulumele.org.

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