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# AFRICAN DANCE, THE PHILADELPHIA WAY



PHOTOS BY GEORGE McNISH/THE STAR-LEDGER

The Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble of Philadelphia performs in Bradley Hall at Rutgers-Newark.

## Old and new styles merge

Ensemble's show at Rutgers-Newark blends ancestral traditions with contemporary steps

BY REVA McEACHERN  
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

In an intimate, black-box theater at Rutgers-Newark's Bradley Hall, the Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble of Philadelphia amused, inspired and roused a packed audience with its theatrical dance and drumming.

"Voices of Our Ancestors: Dances of Africa and the Indigenous Tribes of the African Diaspora" was presented by The Institute on Ethnicity, Culture and the Modern Experience of Rutgers Newark in conjunction with the Department of African American and African Studies.

The free show consisted of six drum-backed dance routines and



that result when Orisha is enraged, the women in acid-washed garments and multicolored belts twirled on bare feet and spun their heads vigorously. In their hands, they spun bodias (horse tails), the bones of which had been painted in many colors.

"In Africa, the horsetail has significance," said Angela Watson, 32, a dancer with the ensemble.

"It represents change and cleanliness," added Dorothy Wilkie, 62, dancer and creative director of Kulu Mele.

The warm, red lights turned cool blue as the drummers set the pace for three men who came from backstage with agogos — a bell-like instrument known as the "time-

drum-backed dance routines and one solo drum performance, and was followed by complimentary Nigerian cuisine in the lobby.

Nearly 200 people attended on Sept. 26, for the third installment in the institute's ethnic dance series.

From Birkenstock-clad Rutgers students to children and local city dwellers, a multicultural audience sat around the theater's black, wooden stage flanked by black pillars, to witness a repertoire that blended West African ancestral traditions and modern African-American creativity.

The hourlong presentation incorporated dances from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Cuba and Brazil



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and contemporary dance crazes rooted in urban centers across the United States.

The ensemble switched between traditional and modern, highlighting dance as a form of black expression that spans time and location. The audience cheered when the dancers combined Macuru — a djembe-drum-based rhythm — with break-dancing and other contemporary dances de-

rived from the "village" of north Philly.

The show began with a line of dancers flooding in from both sides of the stage to form a gyrating semi-circle of women. This dance was called Oya, a Yoruba dance from Nigeria by way of Cuba, symbolizing Orisha, which means force of nature.

Representing turbulence, tempests, hurricanes and tornadoes

keeper" — for a dance called Ogun.

As the lamps turned yellow, three men took center stage and collectively created a disjointed syncopation, reverberating throughout the small theater.

For the dance of Yankadi — a wedding/courtship dance of flirtation — the women wore identical yellow outfits with luminescent thread at the hem, yellow head-dress and belts made of cowry shells that rattled as they shook their hips.

"Cowry shells symbolize many things and are used for religious purposes," said Wilkie. "It's also used to be sexy," added Arisa In-

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