

*"I can look back 50 years," says Baba Robert Crowder, founder of the Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble, remembering the Ghanaian artist and statesman who called the group into being. And more:*

*"Kulu Mele constantly developed and is still developing. There is value in Saka Aquaye's words. This is for our ancestors. While we are living, we are trying to embrace the spirit of our culture."*

Truth be told: Baba is now 79, and he looks back longer than a mere five decades. Imagine him a young man— not so different, perhaps, from the student who says that his experience in our Culture Camp stopped homesickness. Each found in the practice of folk arts a path toward hope, courage, and integrity in the face of inequality and loss.

This is spirit work, Baba tells us. What does he mean? Considering the historic trip that the Kulu Mele dance ensemble took to Guinea this past December, the focus of the conversation excerpted in these WIP pages, Baba tells us not to be distracted by the movements of the body or the beat of the drum. You have to be correct, yes, but also correct inside and in relation to so many others, part of a continuum reaching far back and far forward. He directs us to feeling, motivation, and intent: matters of spirit.

Embracing the spirit of our culture requires engagement with others, awareness of our own parts in forwarding community well-being in the long term. These

pages offer powerful testimonies to the challenges and joys of such spirit work: the territory of folklore. Palestinian women of three generations, described in Nehad Khader's article (and present in her exhibition in our gallery until December 2009) stitch tatreez. This Palestinian needlework is visible affirmation of their rightful connections to particular home places—villages seized and destroyed in the catastrophe of 1948 and after; the Palestinian Nakbba. We will not be dispossessed, tatreez says: our peoplehood, our spirit, will not be taken. Stitching tatreez, women sustain relationships with one another; and with generations of other women. Ruth Stone shares Kpelle (Liberian) wisdom along the same lines: it takes drummers and dancers to build a town. Think of what Kpelle people are saying. The folk arts are inherently social. They enspirit, inspire, enliven: requiring, creating, engaging people. These arts, and their practice, bring communities into being. Spirit dwells here. It is built here. Toni Shapiro-Phim offers Cambodian examples in the chayyam ensembles who lead celebrants in ceremonial processions on particular occasions. They are part of the "mind-altering multi-media" experience that traditional festivals often allow, bringing people into closer relation with one another and abiding Buddhist spirituality. Stories shared by people gathered at Linda Goss's "In the house" workshops are reminders of the ways in which we continue to puzzle out the

past, and our place in the world, by sharing stories with one another; clearing space to hear where spirit rises, lingers, is lost.

Many tragedies haunt these pages, contextualize these words. The horrors of occupation, war, enslavement, and racism lie behind the efforts of those speaking here. Radical hope and progressive visions of justice and equity provide unspoken frameworks: contexts for the expressive work described here. In these contexts, these folk arts of social change address breaks and ruptures and show how we repair them, bridge them, together.

This issue of *Works in Progress* goes to press in a year of many catastrophes. The wisdom in this issue reminds us of what we hold dear; how we endure, how we collectively sustain vital and healthy and just communities. Taking folklore seriously, together; we try to embrace the spirit of our culture. We stand on Baba's shoulders, and on the shoulders of so many others.

—Debra Kodish

