



Fig. 1. Participants gather to await the start of the ODUNDE procession. They hold individual floral tributes that will be offered at the Schuylkill River to Oshun, a Yoruba deity who is the owner of the river and of love.



Fig. 2. The Egungun, a Yoruba-based masked character representing the ancestor spirit, has been danced by the Ishangi family for more than twenty years. It leads the procession to the river.

## ODUNDE An African American Festival on South Street, Philadelphia

South Philadelphian Lois Fernandez, one of the original organizers of the ODUNDE festival, was inspired by a visit to Nigeria in 1972 where she participated in a ceremony held annually in honor of Oshun, a Yoruba river goddess. "We have a river," she thought. "We're between two rivers. Why don't we do an African American event? Why don't we go to the river?" And so ODUNDE, which means "Happy New Year" in Yoruba, was founded. The festival arises out of the tradition of African American culture that integrates the sacred and the secular. A procession led by a Yoruba priest or priestess, and accompanied by a battery of drummers and dancers, culminates in an offering to Oshun

made by throwing fruits and flowers from the South Street bridge into the Schuylkill River. Infused with deep religiosity, the event also has the festive atmosphere of a block party, with organized vendors, scheduled performers, and an African marketplace.

From its modest beginnings in 1975 the festival has expanded over time to draw more than 200,000 people. It has survived and flourished despite opposition and the gentrification that has threatened the neighborhood, a historic African American community. When the ceremonies begin on June 11, 2000, ODUNDE will have been celebrated on South Street for a quarter-century.

Based on and quoting from articles by Karen Buchholz, Lois Fernandez, Debora Kodish, and Thomas B. Morton in Philadelphia Folklore Project *Works in Progress* Special ODUNDE issue, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1993).

Thomas B. Morton has been attending and photographing ODUNDE since 1976. An exhibition of 30 of his black and white photographs is on display at the University of Pennsylvania Museum until January 16, 2000. It was organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project, in collaboration with ODUNDE, Inc., as part of their effort to document African American folk



Fig. 3. At the crossroads, honey is poured for Elegba to allow the procession to advance across the intersection. He opens the door to the spirit world, the world of the Orisha (the Yoruba divinities). He can wreak havoc if he is not first placated with the appropriate offering.

arts and institutions in South Philadelphia. Morton is a photographer, linguist, and community relations specialist. His goal in photographing the festival was originally to capture the perfect ODUNDE moment—when everything comes together, "culturally, visually, intellectually, and emotionally." We picture some of those captured moments here.—Ed.



Fig. 4. A battery of batá drummers from the African dance ensemble Kulu Mele chants and drums to the Yoruba deities. The batá is a double-headed, hourglass-shaped Nigerian drum.



Fig. 5. Oshun's offering of fruits and flowers is made to the river at the South Street bridge.



Fig. 6. Babatunde Olatunji, a renowned Nigerian drummer and teacher, led the ODUNDE procession on several occasions. Here he bestows blessings on members of the gathering at the river.



Fig. 7. A participant at the river is moved by the spirit during offerings and prayers.



Fig. 8. On the stage, a member of the Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble dances to Oshun in the first performance of the day.



Fig. 9. After the offerings at the river, the jubilant crowd makes its way back to 23rd and South streets, where the festival officially begins. Two stages provide space for African and African American dancers, musicians, rappers, steppers, poets, drummers, and entertainers. Here, Olatunji pours libations on the steps to the stage to initiate the actual performances.