



## MAAFA

### CULTURAL RESOURCE



**\*“Slave Group in a Ship Clamoring for the Surface”**

**Photo by Martin Dixon for St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY**

**Sunday, February 22, 2009**

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#### **I. Introduction**

Psalm 88:1-7 and Lamentations 5:1-5, the scriptural foundations for this offering, capture images of one caught in a state of horrific human suffering in conditions so vile that it is as if the very universe from which all is created has turned away and forgotten its child. African American people were, in part, created in the cauterizing fire of suffering as the result of becoming a highly prized product in one of the world’s greatest economic expansions—the triangular-Atlantic slave trade. MAAFA offers a way to lament, to remember, to honor those who died, and those who survived, the kidnapping war and horrific middle passage (both passage and watery grave) that was profit-making for all involved—except our ancestors who made the journey in the bottom of ships. MAAFA provides a way to acknowledge the ongoing transformative struggle to make our lives so much more than that trauma and, at the same time, to never forget.

**And how do we as a people and country process such a traumatic horror? How has this multi-century trafficking of persons impacted the descendants of those who survived and continued calling forth life in a new land?** What has been the cost to the Motherland restructured to feed the slave trade? How has African American culture evolved to aid her people, generation after generation, to seek higher ground, to move forward, as the most charged transformative energy in this new land built with our blood, our sweat, our sacrifice?

MAAFA observances are recent to this very special work of acknowledging the past as gone, and yet continuing, in the myriad ways we carry historic wounds within as we survive. MAAFA also charges us to move forward and overcome adversity that rises in our varied and complex path-making. And as we move forward, we acknowledge that our journey continues to be marked by those and that which is lost along the way.

## II. Praying Ground. . .

Gospel Quartet Song Text

Lead:	Down on my knees	when trouble arise
Response:	Down on my knees	when trouble arise,
I talk with Jesus		beyond the skies.
	I talk with Jesus	beyond the skies
He promised me		He'd be my friend,
	He promised me	He'd be my friend
He'd go with me		until the end
	He'd go with me	Until the end.

African Americans have found in our praying ground that opening channel to leverage the horrific experiences of our lives with the awareness that the experiences had not killed us all, in spite of all we went through. Why? After extreme inhumane abuse, how is it that we are still here? Our going-on-ness is based in our finding a place within that touches eternity from which we can moan, question, analyze, and critique, reaching and holding on to that source within that is more than the body/mind manifestation—praying time.

In his seminal collection, Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans, theologian and historian, James Melvin Washington, pays homage to the African American Christian prayer tradition and practice.<sup>1</sup> The offerings below open a

window to the way in which we, as a people of faith, opened fully our souls to the God of our understanding.

**Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1787-1830)**

O, my God! In all my dangers, temporal and spiritual, I will hope in Thee who art Almighty power, and therefore able to relieve me; who are infinite goodness, and therefore ready and willing to assist me.”

What, though I moan and am afflicted here, and sigh under the miseries of this world for a time, I am sure that my tears shall one day be turned into joy, and that joy none shall take from me. Whoever hopes for the great things in this world, takes pain to attain them; strive and labor for that eternal inheritance? I will never refuse the meanest labors, while I look to receive such glorious wages. I will never repine at any temporal loss, while I expect to gain such eternal rewards. Blessed hope! Be thou my chief delight in life, and then I shall be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; be thou my comfort and support at the hour of death, and then I shall contentedly leave this world, as a captive that is released from his imprisonment.<sup>2</sup>

**In 1808, Peter Williams, Jr., at the passage of the Suppression of the African Slave Trade Act: in prayer, raised the text of the Declaration of Independence to say, why not every man?**

Oh God! We thank thee, that thou didst condescend to listen to the cries of Africa’s wretched sons; and that thou didst interfere in their behalf. At thy call humanity sprang forth, and espoused the cause of the oppressed: one hand she employed in drawing from their vitals the deadly arrows of injustice; and the other in holding a shield to defend them from fresh assaults; and at that illustrious moment, when the sons of ’76 pronounced these United States free and independent; when the spirit of patriotism erected a temple sacred to liberty; when the inspired voice of Americans first uttered those noble sentiments “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;” and when the bleeding African, lifting his fetters, exclaimed, “am I not a man and a brother;” then with redoubled efforts, the angel of humanity strove to restore to the African race the inherent rights of man.<sup>3</sup>

**David Walker in his Appeal pleaded to God for deliverance.**

O! Save us, we pray thee, though God of Heaven and of earth, from the devouring hands of the white Christians!!!

Oh! Thou Alpha and Omega!  
The Beginning and the End,

Enthron'd thou art, in Heaven above,  
Surrounded by Angels there.

From whence thou seest the miseries  
To which we are subject;  
The whites have murder'd us, O God!  
And kept us ignorant of thee.

Not satisfied with this, my Lord!  
They throw us in the seas;  
Be please'd we pray, for Jesus' sake,  
Thou wilt deliver us;  
But that thou may'st effect those things,  
Thy glory must be sought.<sup>4</sup>

**Sojourner Truth's prayer for the return of her son, taken illegally as a wedding gift, as a slave to Alabama:**

...Oh God, you know how much I am distressed, for I have told you again and again. Now, God, help me to get my son. If you were in trouble, as I am, and I could help you, as you can me, think I wouldn't do it? Yes God you know I would do it. Oh, God, you know I have no money, but you can make the people do for me, and you must make the people do for me. I will never give you peace till you do, God. Oh, God, make the people hear me—don't let them turn me off, without hearing and helping me.<sup>5</sup>

**Then there is the early 20th century prayer that is the text of the most revered hymn of Charles Albert Tindley:**

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me (2X)  
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea;  
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.

In the midst of tribulation, stand by me  
When the hosts of hell assail, and my strength begins to fail  
Thou who never lost a battle, stand by me.

In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me  
When I do the best I can and my friends misunderstand  
Thou who knowest all about me, stand by me.

In the midst of persecution, stand by me;  
When my foes in battle array, undertake to stop my way  
Thou who saved Paul and Silas, stand by me.

When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me;

When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly Jordan  
Oh Thou "Lily of the Valley," stand by me.<sup>6</sup>

**In prayer, W.E. B. DuBois called on the spirit of Esther as he prayed for  
Grace to take on the difficult issues of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:**

**In Darkwater, Voices From Within the Veil.**

Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men's mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us—the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty—all these and more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

**James Cleveland prayed in this 1974 gospel hymn:**

Lord, help me to hold out  
Lord help me to hold out  
Lord help me to hold out  
Until my change comes.

My way may not be easy  
You did not say that it would be  
But if it gets dark, I can't see my way  
You told me to put my trust in thee.

That's why I'm asking you, Lord...<sup>8</sup>

### **III. Spirituals**

Spirit based work has been central, it must have been in the worst of times when we held on to our understanding that we were more than what was being wrenched from our bodies. Our collective sanity during slavery became bound up in a body of sacred songs. We called them spirituals because they came from the spirit within us.

Lord, How come we here?

Lord, How come we here?

Lord, How come we here?

Sometimes, I wish I'd never been born

The verse in "*There is a Balm in Gilead*" assures us:

Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work in vain

But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again

There is a balm...

This verse in "*There is a Balm in Gilead*" sources our clinging to the understanding that within us is something of the eternal, we are more than our bodies-physical, and our mind/intellect. As beings we are also charged with that which is eternal and, when all else is gone and unexplainable, we reach down within, drawing strength from that well and we hold on. The spirituals also helped us to say the truth:

I'm a rolling, I'm a rolling, I'm a rolling thru an unfriendly world

I'm a rolling, I'm a rolling, thru an unfriendly world.

Oh brother won't you help me,

Oh brother won't you help me to pray

Oh brother won't you help me, want you help in the service of the Lord...

There are the songs that carried both the lament and the shout:

Cried and I cried, cried all night long

Cried and I cried until I found the Lord

My soul, just couldn't rest contented

My soul, just couldn't rest contented

My soul, just couldn't rest contented

Until I found the Lord

(Moaned and moaned, prayed and I prayed...)

Twentieth century African American strivings covered a lot of ground. We were past slavery and still in a racist society. The south that had lost the Civil War regained a lot of ground by creating a virulently racist segregated system that found arteries throughout every region of the country. There were schools to educate new generations, there was land held onto and lost, there were communities where we practiced, inside of an evil system, how to be a family and the church was an institution that we created in our image. Ground that we owned and our graveyards became the places where we buried the bones of our ancestors. And there were scholars who created a body of research that

exposed the lies of other scholars who distorted the massive efforts of our freedom making.

The Middle Passage itself was a place of darkness for us. Why did we not all jump out of those ships into the sea? How and why was it that we survived to enter the darkness of slavery? We found a few stories of resistance by those who did jump into the sea dancing in the waves of revolt. Why did we choose life—and what has it wrought this lifeline of humanity that threads itself through the American journey? The historians, poets, and writers tell us that we are the voice of resistance, not just for America, but the world. In the twentieth century, our non-violent struggle against segregation taught the world that there is never a time when you cannot find some way to resist and to fight evil even when you do not have knives, guns or missiles.

My first professor of African American history, Dr. Vincent Harding, asked us one day to identify the strong mnemonic device that Ralph Ellison used in Invisible Man to give readers a sense of how black people brought home with them when they migrated north. We sat there, scouring through our minds trying to remember what we had read and after a long silence he exclaimed, “the sweet potato!” This man recently from the South is walking down the street and buys a sweet potato from a street vendor and for a brief moment he is, through taste and smell, located in a place and in a circumstance that is richer and deeper than the harshness of his day-to-day challenges. Sometimes it is a pot of greens and cornbread, peas and rice and okra that carries us, grounds us, as we moved forward seeking a better tomorrow in strange new and hostile territory.

#### **IV. MAAFA Season, St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY, September 2008**

At St. Paul, MAAFA is more a season than anything. It runs for a week, members are asked to arrange their vacation time to volunteer and attend sessions. The first event is the Saturday Dedication of Babies, “Moving Our Children beyond the MAAFA.” This year there were 140 children at the center of this service. The actual three and a half hour production is performed four times during the week. Each day, there are two sessions of presenters teaching about the African American journey in this land.

On Monday evening, when I entered the sanctuary a few minutes before the beginning of the primary event, I had to pass through two large rough hewn wooden carts with two shelves packed mostly with young people, screaming because they had been captured and separated from their parents and everything they knew to go where? This was the way the MAAFA began that evening. As I went to my seat, I wondered if my heart could take it.

The evening’s experience was set in the structure of a work of theatre, a three to four hour production of movement, narrative, song, sights, and sounds. I realized that it was a ritual in the most powerful sense when Reverend David K. Bradley moved to the center and was joined by a line of attendants. The center became a communion table set on the floor of the pulpit-turned-set, now turned communion table, offering all to join in an “open communion.” “All who will—come to the table....”

All within that space were invited to become members of a community of witnesses. I thought to myself, “this is not a show, they just said that ‘with this ceremony, we consider each and every one of you a member of this community and we seal that understanding with our highest most sacred ceremony, Communion, and remembering Christ’s journey to-through-and-beyond the cross.’” During the next three and a half hours, sometimes people applauded at a song or a powerfully rendered historical statement but, for me, it was not a theatrical production—it was a ritual where those within that room were invited to bring all that we held about this historical journey, consciously known and unknown, to the fore. We were invited to bring the damage to this place of memory—through tears and horror, to honor our refusal to move forward, to seek better, and to understand family and honor and support in a deeper more healing way.

That is the public side. The infrastructure of St. Paul’s MAAFA Season begins in July when, under the leadership of the pastor, director Jesse Wooden, Jr. and his creative team, the cast is gathered for orientation sessions to learn what MAAFA at St. Paul is about. The pre-training—scriptural lessons, historical lessons, and physical sessions – aid in building the physical, intellectual and spiritual for those who come together to form the small temporary internal community that will create the ritual that serves to guide the larger community through MAAFA.

The MAAFA teaches the history of a mass multi-century relocation by brute force of humans from Africa to the Americas, in a way that aids survival and continuance. One of the driving forces of this great effort is the belief that African American culture needed a way of coming to a place within ourselves where we explored and channeled any historical grief, loss, distortion, and pain that we might hold from this past.

The visionary pastor, (now retired) Reverend Dr. Johnnie Youngblood, came to this work out of his search for what it might mean to be a healing church in East Brooklyn. Rev. Youngblood, pastor of St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, talked with me about visiting Israel and witnessing the ceremonial weeping at the Wailing Wall. He left wondering how we, as African Americans, were handling the heavy residual load of all we had experienced in the absence of a collective ritual place or moment. How could we remember so that we could not have the poison of kidnapping, the Middle Passage, being sold and sold again while, at the same time, being triggered to breed in the manner of cattle and other livestock, dormant and alive within us? What was the ongoing damage of not having a way to go to that suffering through a process that eased the distortion of our personal and communal future?

The ministry at St. Paul is marked by Rev Youngblood’s personal questioning—what does church mean? How do we serve the church inside the walls and not address the community outside the walls? How do we make businesses in our neighborhoods accountable? How do we find jobs for our people if we do not assist in opening up new businesses? How do we shelter if we are not involved in creating housing? How do we

teach if we are not supporting schools? How do we serve the spiritual health of our people if we do not deal ritually with our historical pain?

The innovative work of Dr. Marimba Ani and her concept of MAAFA provided a way of bringing a process into being with this church community. The word MAAFA, when translated from Swahili to English, is used to define: menace, threats, terror, and injustice. “The MAAFA” translated describes the African Holocaust as the most destructive act ever perpetrated by one people upon another, the enslavement of “Mother Africa” and hundreds of thousands of her children.<sup>9</sup> At the 14<sup>th</sup> annual MAAFA Season at St. Paul, I was introduced to the member who handled the budget, and she let me know that this observance did not pay for itself. The ticket sales to the events during MAAFA week were not enough. MAAFA was a ministry of the church and is supported as an essential program of the church.

The cast of The MAAFA SUITE...A Healing Journey numbered more than one hundred. Twice the ritual was rocked by a moving slavery chain which came up from the back of the church, bodies bent, linked together, rocking as they moved in a slow march through the aisles. When we got to the intermission, I asked Rev. Youngblood, “How do you take care of the cast?” He said, “Come with me.” We went downstairs to the basement of the church and I walked into a space that had been turned into a healing center. As the three and a half hour ritual unfolded, as cast members came off the stage, they were surrounded by a volunteer cadre of healers who understood that each person had to be touched, rested, given support to breathe and regroup for their return to the stage and the next unfolding chapter. It was a community of supporters who stayed downstairs so that those carrying us through the journey could themselves be carried through the evening. Tea, juice, couches and, in one room much quieter, there were masseuse padded tables where one could rest and recover. What was important was the sense of knowingness among those who stayed below, being sure that as cast members came down, they were taken into a supportive healing environment. I remember seeing the man who had just inhabited the role of Nat Turner, and he was still uncoiling from standing in that role, he was coming back to himself and preparing for the next role he had to play in the ritual upstairs.

**In my more than forty-five years of using song and performance to charge our struggle for survival and transformation in this land, I have never seen anything like this ritual.** I wondered about traditional rituals of family and community; here was a family, here was a community. I wondered if they would continue and hoped they would.

Back upstairs, the festival unfolded, moving through the events from this side of the water toward its climax. We saw lynching, we saw sexual violation, we saw the impossible, we saw many thousands gone and we saw flashes of bonding, love and light, moving onward through the darkness.

As we got near the ending and it was “**we**” by this time, there was no separation for me. In the same place that had carried the slavery chain, the cast came dancing, singing, call and response on four levels of stage, sweeping, every aisle of the church exploded around

us drenching us in healing celebration of having made it thus far and shouting and dancing and singing thanks for being a part of the going-on-ness. The ending celebration was familiar: the movement was structured in the language of contemporary dance – the dance of the street, and the club dance floor, and the concert dance tradition; the music was the sound of the contemporary gospel choir, African drumming, and the shout—all signaling that we were journeying on no matter what—it was transcendent.

As I think about this huge effort, as I moved through the building, there was a small chapel in this church, an ancestor room. Members are invited to bring “8 x 20” framed photographs of their ancestors creating wallpaper with hundreds of images of souls who have passed on. When I sat in that chapel with my memories of those within my personal circles who had died, I felt full, surrounded and held.

My experience with this expression of MAAFA made me think that I might now understand traditional African festivals that define the existence of a people, ordering their year, grounding the people within ritual seasons—creating the structures and experiences that bring all that is and has been together to prepare for the next cycle.

### **We’ve Come a Long Way**

We’ve come a long way to be together, you and me

We’ve come a long way to be together, you and me

And we’ll stay holding to each other, fighting and trusting as we grow

It’s been a mighty distance, dangerous journey to me here...

It’s taken the sacrifice, so many of us, to be one...<sup>10</sup>

### **Notes**

\*The African American Lectionary thanks the Pastor and members of St. Paul Community Baptist Church of Brooklyn, New York for the use of images from their 2008 MAAFA Commemoration for this lectionary unit.

1. Washington, James Melvin. Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
2. Ibid., p.10.
3. Ibid., p.16.
4. Ibid., p.25.
5. Ibid., p.55.
6. C. A. Tindley. Arr. by F. A. Clark. Townsend, Willa A. Gospel Pearls. Nashville, TN: Sunday School Pub. Board, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., 1921.
7. Washington, James Melvin. Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. p. 105
8. Ibid., p. 226.

9. Ani, Marimba. Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implication of African Spirituality in the Diaspora. Nkonimfo Publications, New York: 1989, 2007. Also see MAAFA online location: [www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org](http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org). Go to the Cultural Resource section on the home page and click the Year One Archive; once at the archive page, scroll down to the MAAFA cultural resource unit.

10. Johnson Reagon, Bernice. “We’ve Come a Long Way To Be Together.” Give Your Hands to Struggle. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.