LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

Tour Notes
On view October 5, 2019 - October 22, 2019 at MoCADA House on Governors Island

SUMMARY

Inspired by Dr. Marimba Ani’s book, “Let the Circle Be Unbroken,” MoCADA encouraged the 2019 MoCADA Creators in Residence to explore the following quote by Ani as a central theme of the work they would create on Governors Island, all summer long.

“The term ‘Maafa’ (from the book, Let The Circle Be Unbroken) is a Kiswahili word for ‘disaster’ that we are now using to reclaim our right to tell our own story. Maafa refers to the enslavement of our people and to the sustained attempt to dehumanize us. Because the Maafa has disconnected us from our cultural origins, we have remained vulnerable in a social order that does not reflect our cultural identity.” – Dr. Marimba Ani, “To Be African.”

FEATURED ARTISTS

Aguanile Journal (Media) @aguanilejournal
Denae Howard (Mixed-Media) @artschoolscammer
Hadaiyah “YaYa” Bey (Performance) @hadai_yah
Idi Basengo (Painting) @basengoidi
Joyce Leann Joseph (Performance) @archivistafterhours
Julian Joseph Kyle (Painting) @julianjosephkyle
Kesiena Onosigho (Textiles) @kesiena
Khidr Joseph (Photography/Experiential) @khidrijoseph
Lillian Hanan Al-Bilali (Curation) @lillianhananabalbalali
Nicole Goodwin (Performance) @goodwin9
Tania Laure Balan-Gaubert (Mixed-Media) @tanialaure
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF **LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?**

The title of the exhibition, Let the Circle Be Unbroken, is derived from the book of the same title by author Marimba Ani. The book served as inspiration for MoCADA’s 2019 Creators in Residence. The creators were asked to interpret this quote artistically through their chosen medium such as painting, performance, and installation. The phrase refers to generational trauma, legacy, and methods of liberation. The “circle” can be thought of as the cycle that many people of African descent experience such as cycles of injustice, cycles of hardship, and the cycles of subsequent trauma derived from these elements.

**KEY TERMS**

**MAAFA:** a term which describes the historical and current atrocities that the African people are being subjected to by non-African individuals or political forces. It is derived from the Swahili word “great disaster.”

**PAN-AFRIKANISM:** a movement based on the idea that all people indigenous to Africa should unify politically, geographically, and socially

**LIBERATION:** to be set free, either physically and/or mentally, from oppression or slavery

**RECONTEXTUALIZATION:** to change the context, or the circumstance in which a concept is often understood, of something

**APPROPRIATION:** to take something from someone else, often without permission

**ETHOS:** beliefs that characterize a group of people or ideology

**WORLD VIEW:** the way in which people make sense of their surroundings, life, and the universe

**COSMOS:** the universe or a way of thinking

**AFRICANIZATION:** the modification of spaces or names to honor African culture and identity

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QUESTIONS

1. What topics do the artists in this exhibition explore?

2. In which ways do these artists recontextualize imagery we often view as “violent”? Think about Julian Joseph Kyle’s large-scale family portrait paintings, one of which depicts the lynching of his great-grandfather (see image on page 2, left). Another example is Khidr Joseph’s self portraits featuring blackface and KKK costumes (see image, right). How does the use of “uncomfortable” imagery force the audience to think?

3. How is “maafa” still being carried out today, both systematically and socially? Name examples.

4. What are productive ways to liberate oneself from maafa?

5. Why is art a helpful tool in dismantling oppressive forces? How can one ensure that their art does this successfully?
EXHIBITION THEMES

1. THE MAAT/MAAFA/SANKOFA PARADIGM

Author Marimba Ani developed the Maat/Maafa/Sankofa Paradigm concept to explain the construction, reconstruction, and destruction of Afrikan civilization. She uses this concept as an analytical tool to explore the ways in which white supremacy functions to keep people of African descent at a disadvantage. Let’s breakdown each term:

- **Maat** = Kamitic word for truth, justice, balance, and cosmic order. Although “Maat” is considered a concept, the concept is also represented by a goddess of the same name.

- **Maafa** = a term which describes the historical and current atrocities that the African people are being subjected to by non-African individuals or political forces. It is derived from the Swahili word “great disaster.”

- **Sankofa** = a word from the Akan tribe of Ghana. It is derived from three separate words - San, Ko, and Fa. Sa means return. Ko means go. Fa means look, seek, take. Together, the phrase translates to “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind,” or “go back and get it.”

Although these terms have significant meanings on their own, together, they explain a process - maat can represent the seeking of truth, maafa can explain the current ways in which Black Americans are situated, and Sankofa can explain how Black people can get what’s rightfully theirs both emotionally and tangibly.

2. LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN BY MARIMBA ANI

Summary of the Book by Section

Section 1: Problems, Issues, Terms

In the first section of the book, Ani explains that many Black people in America have been told that they are “not African” because of the lost connections to their culture influenced by slavery. When African slaves were brought here, White Americans constantly attempted to subdue African traditions such as drumming, singing, dancing, cooking traditional food, and more. The oppressor often points out the loss of language, clothing, and language that occurred once Africans were unjustly brought here on slave ships. However, Ani argues that “Africa survives in our spiritual makeup...” She emphasizes the concept of the spirit and how the African-American

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ethos is inherently spiritual because of our unique traditions and beliefs. Ethos relates to the African-American world-view and creates a sense of culture. Ani then asks a crucial question: “what happens when a people are forced to live (survive) within a culture based on a world-view that is oppressive to their ethos?” This question sets the basis for the rest of the book.

Section 2: Utaratibu Wa Kutizama* African Philosophy and World-View

*Utaratibu Wa Kutizama = “the way of the world” in Kiswahili

Ani describes the African cosmos as spiritual, whereas Western civilizations do not relate to the cosmos. She explains that development wisdom and knowledge depends on spirituality, while in Western civilizations spirituality is often seen as irrational or separate from tangible knowledge. According to Ani, African ideology relies on the existence of complementary pairs, while European ideology relies on the existence of opposing pairs.

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<tr>
<th>European view</th>
<th>Opposing pairs</th>
<th>“Knowledge vs. opinion”</th>
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<td>“Objective vs. subjective”</td>
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<tr>
<th>African view</th>
<th>Complementary pairs</th>
<th>“Death and rebirth”</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>“Heaven and Earth”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“Spirituality and reality”</td>
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Ani states, “The Diasporic Africa, in his or her being, represents the embodiment of the confrontation of two divergent world-views: a spiritual ethos inheriting a sacred, cosmic world-view forced to adjust to a materialistic society in inhuman circumstance.” This means that people of African descent must mediate their two realities: one being of African origin and the other being of European influence.

Section 3: Maafa* The Holocaust (Dehumanizing Circumstance, Human Response)

*Maafa = disaster in Kiswahili

This section details the capture and enslavement of African people and how this led to trauma. The oppressor’s goal was to destroy the self perception of African people, to make them feel

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5 Ibid, P. 4.
6 Ibid, P. 4.
8 Ibid, 11.
worthless. However, out of this chaos rose a defiant response through song, dance, and maintaining a Black identity.

Section 4: Kuzinduka*: African Retentions in the Caribbean and South America

*Kuzinduka = reawakening in Kiswahili

Ani explains the difference between Africans living in the Caribbean and South America vs. Africans living in the United States. The geographical elements of Caribbean and South American countries are more similar to African terrain than that of the U.S. Also, Africans in the Caribbean and South America were allowed to play drums and were surrounded by more fellow Africans than whites. Because of this, these groups of Diasporic Africans were able to retain their culture as well as create new traditions with more ease than Africans enslaved in America. One example being the creation of Vodou in Haiti, which was a response to France’s attempt to force Africans into practicing Catholicism.

Section 5: Kungana/Emi Lilo*: African Diasporic Ritual Drama

*Kungana/Emi Lilo = “to come together” in Kiswahili/”spirit possession” in Yoruba

African world-view is expressed through rituals. Rituals such as dancing, singing, moving. Ani states, “We transformed suffering into an opportunity to express spirit.”9 She uses the term ritual drama to describe the ways in which African-Americans used performance to enhance communal life.

Section 6: “Kucheza Ngoma*: Communing, Shoutin’, and Feeling Rhythm”

*Kucheza Ngoma = “to dance to the drum” in Kiswahili

Ani emphasizes music as a crucial element of “spiritual expression”10 and the cosmos. She describes the ability to turn trauma into celebratory survival as the “soul-force” of Black people. In contrast to the emphasis on rationality in European culture, African culture values emotion as a form of artistic expression. It is important to express art outside of the white gaze.

Section 7: “Nyama* Nommo: Signs of the African Spirit”

*Nyama = “energy of action” in Bamana11

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9 Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, 25.
10 Ibid, 33.
11 Ibid, 40.
This section deals with the ways in which verbal expression is crucial to maintaining African spirituality and the expression of our ethos. These traditions live on through modern acts such as rapping, call and response, and the creation of our own language, or “slang.”

Section 8: “Amelogwa*: Denials of African-Diasporic Humanism”

*Amelogwa = “under the spell of witchcraft” in Kiswahili

African rituals function to restore order. Colonialism worked to disrupt these rituals and therefore create chaos. Because of colonialism, many African-Americans turned, and still to turn, against one another. Ani describes the act of a Black person killing another Black person not as a homicide, but as “suicide.”

Section 8: Tumalize Duara*: Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees

*Tumalize Duara = “let us complete the circle” in Kiswahili

In this final section, Ani focuses on highlighting the resilience of African culture. She states that the principles of the African-Diaspora do not operate the idea of “art for art’s sake” but instead “art for life’s sake.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & INSPIRATIONS

BOOKS

- Toward the African Revolution by Franz Fanon

Toward the African Revolution by Franz Fanon is a five section text detailing the atrocities of colonization as well as his suggestions for how Africans can resist colonization forces. He discusses various topics such as the ways that doctors attempt to invalidate African people’s complaints of pain and sickness, systematic racism, issues in his native country of Algeria, and how to attain unity and liberation. This book influences many of the topics covered in this exhibition specifically the ways in which we can overcome the effects of colonization. Simply the act of making art is an act of defiance against European influences.

- How We Fight White Supremacy by Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Rankin

How We Fight White Supremacy features words of advice from artists, scholars, comedians, activists, filmmakers, and more on how to dismantle White supremacy. The book shows that there are many ways to dismantle this power structure such as education, community building,
internal emotional healing, supporting black businesses, and more. Another important aspect of rejecting white supremacy is creating art work. For example, some of the artists in the Let The Circle Be Unbroken exhibition dismantle white supremacy through depicting the historical treatment of Black people in their own way. Others go for a more experimental, abstract route through mixed media works and performance. The exhibition shows how various Black artists use different mediums as a form of healing from white supremacy.

- **Yurugu** by Marimba Ani

Yurugu, written by the same author as Let the Circle Be Unbroken, discusses the inner workings of white supremacy on a global level. It highlights the methods behind Euro-centric thought and outcomes of these methods. Ani critiques white supremacy from an African point of view highlighting the violence and entitlement that historically exists in the European mindset.

**Questions? Comments? Concerns?**
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**Works Cited**

