

THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN MODERN ARTS IN REDRESSING BOUNDARY RELATED TENSIONS IN AFRICAN STATES

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ABSTRACT

Issues associated with the unity of the African states and the circumstances that threaten its solidarity have been among the major targets of the Organization of African Unity. It is noteworthy that the problems of geo-political integration haunting the diverse ethnic groups in African countries are all connected to the consequences of colonialism that birthed their respective economic and socio-political structures. The reason that art has the power to assert the concept of socio-cultural consciousness in the citizens of any nation, as well as effectively projecting her indigenous identity more than any other discipline points to the fact that its relevance, as a viable instrument in fostering the integration of the African state, cannot be over. There is no doubt that visual arts have an inherent potential to resolving the diverse boundary-related tensions haunting many African states. The primary concern of this paper is to discuss the diverse ways through which African states can achieve economic, political and cultural sustainability and sustainable development through the mechanism of visual arts.

Keywords: African boundary, Africa Art and Society, Boundary Tension, Society and Crises Management, African Modern Art.

INTRODUCTION

The reoccurring spate of life-threatening conflicts is a bane to a sustainable socio-economic and technological development of African states. This is because it is hard for the economy of any nation to thrive in the absence of peace. In her analysis of its nature, Mbalamya (2012) agrees that “conflicts are natural phenomena in human beings’ lives. Depending on their intensity, conflicts are expressed sometimes in violent or nonviolent ways.” Modern African life has been greatly affected by European countries during colonisation of the different African states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, many aspects of African contemporary life reflect the residual effects of colonialism, while boundary related conflicts remain one of the major issue inherited as a result of colonialism. The result of the unpredictability of the European partitioning of African states gave rise to the lumping together of many ethnic nationalities whose physical characteristics hinder political, social, or economic stability. This also affected many ethnic or natural boundaries of the past.

Tension between accountability, responsibility and reconciliation usually remains pronounced and unresolved after every social crisis. For instance, traces of such tension still exist between Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya boundaries, and have given rise to desert wars, terrorists’ activities and insurgences like the Al-Shabab jihadist group. While the Bakasi peninsular crises between Nigeria and Cameroon are still fresh in our mind, the dispute between Ghana and Togo, which occurred between 1956 and 1966, and which gave rise to the separation of the Ewe people by artificial or externally imposed boundaries by the Europeans are good examples of boundary related tensions in Africa. The list of such boundary related tensions are many across African countries. It is within this kind of situation that certain forms of art become meditative tools for peace and harmonious co-existence.

Griffitta (1986), explains in his article, *The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries*, that boundary tensions have become one of the major post-colonial problems of many African countries. The partitions of the African states at the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, have led to many boundary tensions across the continent since her independence from colonial administration. The type of conflict with violence is the main concern of this discourse which is often instigated by boundary-related tensions. In fact, according to a ranking by Minority Rights International in 2010, Africa constitutes more than half of the top twenty countries where residents are mostly under threat (Minority Rights Group International, 2010). Sheehan posits that there have been about 560 wars and violent conflicts around the world since 1815, which consequently led to the loss of an estimate of about 3.5 billion lives (2007, as cited in Mbalamya, 2012). Although newspaper headlines are riddled with conflicts that exhibit high violence, occurring mostly in inter-state links, there are also often overlooked low-intensity of conflicts between smaller ethnicities and communities in Africa (Ibid, 2010). The primary factors behind these conflicts are usually linked to shortages of land, water and other natural resources. In order to make their boundaries more congruent with the ethnic landscape, some states might attempt to adjust their boundaries at the expense of a neighbor.

Borgatti’s(1983), review of Robert Brain’s book, *Art and society in Africa*, explains that Brain’s focus was to put African art “firmly in its social context. Drawing on Horton’s work on the Kalabri Ijow and writings of other scholars such as Herbert cole, on Ibo Mbari houses, Brain explains how African traditional art can be veritable instrument for social entertainment and change. The important role played by art in curbing tensions can be better appreciated if the issues associated with tensions are reviewed. Based on findings from diverse researches on conflicts, three dominant points of views have been provided. They include the

psychological, sociological and philosophical perspectives respectively. The first, which is the psychological perspective focuses on the human nature, while the sociological perspective justifies conflict by the human being's social situation and context. The philosophical perspective describes conflict as "the incessant and natural clash of opposites, determined and inevitable" (Ibid, 2012). Generally art has the potency to address these three areas as will be revealed in this paper

Cognitive skills, alongside the ability to think creatively and critically reflect a particular value orientation that focuses on maximizing sustainable social developments and peaceful co-existence. Developing general critical appreciation of art is among the highest goal any society should aspire to in solving conflict problems. In his theoretical inquiry Tom Anderson (1990), argued that art fosters the entire breadth and depth of problem solving sensibility that better equip the society on how to deal with serious issues that threaten peace. He further describes four ways art contributes to the development of such sensibilities, these include, *sense of history and civilization, creativity development of the human mind, effective communication skills and tool for making critical choices and assessment*. This critical level of art appreciation will enable people to appreciate each other's creative talents that will foster those social elements that unite rather than divide people.

Works of art act as physical manifestations or visual expressions of fundamental beliefs and emotions and also aid in creatively translating culture. Most times, art works contribute significantly to the propagation of ideas, societal and personal values and attitudes from generation to generation. In transmitting and projecting cultural values, they inevitably aid in reinforcing the people's belief in their cultural identity, as well as its corresponding traditional practices and socio-cultural norms and values. Consequently, this will influence how they effectively address issues like tensions with proven strategies handed down the ages that they are accustomed and also influenced sustainability of the economic and social development of the different contemporary African state.

Before the advent of colonialism and its retrogressive impact on the continent's development, there were traditional mechanisms employed by many African communities in resolving these sorts of boundary related tensions. Dare Arowolo's remark, in his paper *The Effects of Western Civilization and Culture on Africa* supports this view:

“...colonialism, slave trade and missionaries are the bastion of Western civilization and culture in Africa. This is correct to the extent that colonialism serves as a vehicle of implantation of cultural imperialism in Africa. Colonialism, perceived in this context, is an imposition of foreign rule over indigenous traditional political setting and foreign dominance and subjugation of African people in all spheres of their social, political, cultural, economic and religious civilizations. (Arowolo, 2010)

In the same vein, Mimiko (2010) discusses on the consequence of this, which include the devastation of social patterns and the introduction of a new culture of violence. He also provides a more detailed insight into this in his article:

Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed and, in their places, nothing was given. The democratic process, rudimentary though it was, but with great potential as accompanies every human institution, was brutally uprooted and replaced by the authoritarianism of colonialism. A new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence and colonialism armed with the structures of the modern state to continue to carry out the art and act of subjugation of the mass of the people in the service of colonialism (Mimiko, 2010:641-42)

The cultures of many countries within the continent, like the Igbo culture for instance, usually have established indigenous structures of using elders to negotiate an end to conflict. The elders, among other duties to the community, most often employ informal approaches in resolving conflicts and creating sustainable development of their various communities. Since the communities believe in these elders, they sometimes create an appropriate atmosphere for dialogue, where both parties meet and constructive negotiations are made. Indigenes mostly respect the traditional approach than that of the government because they believe that the former relates more to their socio-cultural identity and therefore defends their interests better than the latter. The traditional African religion, which is basically abstract in nature and festooned with a lot of symbolic iconography and figurines, plays a more important role in this regard. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the indigenous African is sacrilegious in nature, and reverts them greatly. Furthermore Art, from the African perspective transcends, not just a mere physical representation of subjects but an abstract expression of values, identity and norms among others.

In 2001, six studies were undertaken under the framework of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Women and Culture of Peace Programme. The primary objectives of their initiation was aimed at evaluating the role of women and peace in six African countries, namely; Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Namibia, Somali, and Tanzania respectively. It was indeed obvious from these initiatives and their findings that there was a budding interest in the unexplored possibilities and potentials of African modern arts as a viable tool in fostering peace in Africa.

The researcher will adopt the qualitative research methodological for this study. As such data will consist mostly of iconography, as well as sourced materials from the internet, books and articles. Also, The Kess Eps Kess Epskamp's "Model of Possible Role of the Arts in Conflict and Post-Conflict Peace-building" will be the employed by the researcher as the ideal framework for analyzing the data. This will enable a proper and more detailed examination of the positive influence art has on the individual, community, and society. Epskamp believes that in addressing conflicts, it is important to "develop alternative and playful visions which outline the future nation" by encouraging dialogue between the groups.

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW OF RELATED TERMS

The subject matter of this study is often times associated with related terms, some of which will be briefly discussed in context. The key relevant terms include the following; Conflict peace building, peacemaking and peacekeeping.

It was Boutros Boutros Ghali, who actually popularized the phrase while announcing his Agenda for Peace in 1992 as then the United Nations Secretary General. From that moment it has become a sort of cliché with diverse connotations in policy making. In spite of the fact that Peace building, peacemaking and peacekeeping all address issues concerning peace, they differ in certain aspects. As a result several frameworks have been construed in an attempt to analyse them, and among the prominent ones are those of John Paul Lederach, Dennis Sandole, and N. Ropers. The success of these frameworks depends on the stage of the conflict and a variety of other external factors (Gold, 2006). Daniella Gold's description provides a very effective perspective:

Generally speaking, peacekeeping is reducing conflict and violence by the intervention of a third party while peacemaking is defined as the attempt to tackle some concrete problem in a process that generally begins with a difference of interests, proceeds in the form of negotiations, and in the end- if successful- leads to an agreement. Peacebuilding, on the other hand, takes place on a larger time scale and focuses on transforming relationships and social structures so that future conflicts are less likely to occur. (Ibid, 2006)

From this analysis, it is clear that the intent of Peace-building is directed towards addressing the causative factors responsible for violent conflicts by establishing peace and creating an atmosphere that forestalls, checks and prevents violence. Some known approaches adopted by peace-builders in this regard include establishing new institutions, reconstructing society, and developing new socioeconomic frameworks.

It is important to state here that in the aspect of conflict theories, most schools of thought believe that prevention of violent conflicts is much better than resolving them. Furthermore, the terms mentioned above fall in any of these categories; conflict prevention, conflict resolution and conflict management. Hence when conflict is effectively prevented peace is being kept, whenever it is resolved peace is being made and when it is managed peace is being built. Art plays a significant role in addressing these three categories, as well as creating an atmosphere for a sustainable economic and political development.

THE AFRICAN ART AS A MECHANISM FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW

It is a fact that for centuries, the arts has proven to be the most effective means of communicating the human experience in ways that have practically nurtured peace and sometimes inspired violence. For instance, iconic masterpieces like the statue of liberty sculpted by Auguste Bartholdi (dedicated, October 28, 1886,) have stood for years as an emblem for promoting peace and freedom.

The art, due to its capability of serving social functions, could be effective in communicating and changing the way people think and act. Therefore, their possibility in transforming the thoughts and actions of people is inexhaustible. This makes it a very potent medium for changing the dynamics in conflicts, whether they are interpersonal, inter communal, national or global.

Conflict resolution requires mechanisms or approaches that are as diverse and complicated as the human spirit, and art has the ability of providing them. It is not surprising that "conflict resolution is increasingly being mainstreamed into educational activities, sustainable economic-development programs, refugee assistance and public health." (Zelizer, 2007). Therefore, it is important for advocates and partners, NGOs involved in peacekeeping, peacekeeping and peacemaking initiatives to integrate

it in their strategies, whereby individuals can express, heal and reconcile themselves creatively through art. Although peace as generally perceived connotes the absence of war, in many cultures in Africa it means the existence of an atmosphere that promotes 'freshness', health, well-being, harmony, calm and tranquility. They also believe that whenever any of these qualities are threatened or absent, the implication is that conflict is imminent. Beyond its inherent ability to resolve conflict, art has also been proven to be a veritable tool for economic sustainability and sustaining political development

REVIEW OF SELECTED ARTS BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION INITIATIVES IN AFRICA

Three major cultural events marked Africa's official arrival on the world art scene. They include the first World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966, the First Pan-African Festival in Algiers in 1969 and FESTAC (the second World Festival of Black Arts) in Lagos in 1977. These festivals played a pivotal role in the development of the founding cultural and political movements in Africa from the 1960s to the present day. There are other art and cultural festivals like the First All African Cultural Festival in Algiers (1969), the First Workshop on African Folklore, Dance and Music in Mogadiscio Somalia (1970) among others, that has helped in enforcing the African solidarity and enabling her transcend the ominous dictates of geopolitical boundaries that have plagued her since colonial times.

The significance of these festivals is profound in the sense that they played an important role in promoting the uniqueness of the diverse cultures within the continent. They also projected the possibility of a unified Africa where the focus was on what defines rather than what separates the respective African states. Carrie Lambert Beatty's (2008), article, *Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the new art/activism*, explains how a gigantic sculptural piece, the *langenort Rostock*, a ship rented for use as a mobile clinic aboard, was used by a group of feminist activists and medical doctors in Netherlands (known as *women of waves*). By moving twelve miles off the sea coast of Netherlands and into the borders of other countries like Ireland (2001), Poland (2003) and Portugal (2004), these women medical team started cross-border medical procedures to help some depressed women of Netherland in abortion related issues. This was designed to help them escape prosecution in their country where such medical activities are forbidden. In this case, the mobile clinic or gigantic sculpture represents the relationship between art and society where art and social activities are conducted across national boundaries. There is the need to also acknowledge the act of radical creative imaginations; which is at the core of these *women on wave project* and the idea that the dominion of one nation state over the need of her women could be evaded by a short *Twelve Miles* trip across their borders. In this classical case, national boundaries become a point where social issues, rather than create tensions or crisis for the society, are resolved through art. By retailing the stories of these social crises, art engages society in re-familiarizing itself, through their content or messages, towards proper understanding of cultural contexts.

It is important to note that before "applied science" and "technology" became key words, the concept of art was central to discuss about material culture and its connection to the society's knowledge of how to solve social and cultural issues across to the varied divided, borders and frontiers. In his article "Art and applied science" Schatberg(2012), explains that for centuries before "applied science" and technology" emerged as key words, "art served as a fundamental category for understanding material culture and its relationship to society and natural knowledge. The advancement or growth of technology also contributed to the neglect of the art as a veritable tool in solving inter communal problems, for while technology advanced weapons of war, the novelty of the human spirit; which art constantly celebrate and promoted, has been grossly neglected.

The problem of socio-political, economic and cultural marginalization of frontier regions of Africa requires certain creative solutions. This calls for certain kind of inter-border or ethnic corporations that acknowledge the veritable role the different aspects of the arts to help remove conflicts and sustain all positive developments within the African state. Multicultural art education and activities provides opportunity for the society to confront social cultural differences that are capable of coursing conflict, and use them to re-negotiate for peace and unity. This has been achieved through festivals, international art exhibitions, art workshops etc. Sheila (1993) also added that some artists are already using contemporary technologies or other forms of art in the process of commenting on culture conflicts hampering social development. After more than 40 years post-colonial Africa era, Africans need to face these problems positively and her art and cultural activities remains a vital creative force with the potential to remove or reduce boundary tensions. This human relationship approach to peace and unity through the above mentioned art activities, triumph in the recognition of the fact that the diversity of human societies is worthy of celebration.

There is no doubt that complexities associated with African art: its forms and practices, have repeatedly been shown to be influential towards the experience of understanding and appreciating them. Memories of many pre-colonial traditional African social, political and cultural experiences appear to fade with the passage of time, but art continually reveals the ongoing processes by which the past are renegotiated into the presence. Art plays a more fundamental role as an arbiter of “fact” in such social tension or crises. It becomes the voice of the people, effectively communicating the “unspeakable” it redefine social options for peace and harmony. Art helps the society to recognize the interplay of effective and intellectual qualifies in decision making, recognizing the society’s proficiencies and deficiencies. Art become the vision of reality in a state of confusion and endless quest for social change. It is also within the characteristics of some art works to reveal malicious effect of certain historic events to avoid a repeat. Much as the society’s perception of these forms of art can be subsumed under the more general way of appreciating their aesthetic sensibilities and appeal, the process or procedure by which realities are composed or decomposed in art gives them their meaning and role in bringing about social harmony and change necessary for a peaceful co-existence.

CONCLUSION

This paper is aimed at changing the society's perception of the role of art and artist's in re-negotiating the past for better future within the society where it is created. Professional artists often engage, consciously or unconsciously, in critical assessment of crises across several social and cultural border tensions that affect people negatively.

William and Norton (1940), in their article *Modern Art and Social Responsibility*, explains that art and artist have responsibilities towards the society that produces them and worried that today, those obligation are not fulfilled, either because they are not recognized by these artists or by the society. Historians and social scientists, according to Karl Kurzband (1934) assert that no picture of a society is complete without a study of its art forms, since it is through art that the aspirations and achievements of that society are most vividly expressed. Guided by its aesthetic appeal, art and artist's social obligations dignify itself in the services of the society by communicating those elements that are socially significant in conflict resolution and sustainable development. Art always have something to contribute to the society well-being and should be taken seriously.

William J. and Norton Jr. concludes that, since we are living in a world in which social, political and moral values are being challenged on all sides, there arises the need of the individual to meet these social issues in a clearer understanding of what they mean and stand for. To him, no solution to social conflict between neighbors on boundary issues can be arrived independently of vicarious experiences assimilated through logic of social reasoning. Art runs counter solutions, possible by making clear the subject matter that rational and spiritual values still stands higher than the emotional and the irrational. To understand the art of any society one needs to understand the basic political economic and social institutions. Social science programs have been enriched by references to art forms, especially as visual aids. The power of art and artists to bring about social transformation should henceforth not be taken lightly.

If Africa's modern boundaries had been allowed to evolve in a more natural manner, or if the colonial powers had based their partition upon a thorough appreciation of the ethnic contours of the continent, it is assumed that the states of Africa would have experienced far more sustainability and sustainable economic and political developments and less prone to boundary conflict.

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