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**Peace Education: The Visual Artist's Responsibility**

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**Abstract**

*Peace is broadly defined as the absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering and violence, and about peaceful co-existence. It has to do primarily with creating and maintaining a just order in society and the resolution of conflict by non-violent means. As beautiful as peace is, man has not allowed himself to enjoy real peace. There are numerous cases of religious intolerance, violence, genocide, wars etc. threatening human's corporate existence, not only in Africa but in many other parts of the world.*

*This, therefore, means that everyone must be educated and enlightened about peace. Though, the visual image has been one of the most effective forms of human communication, it has not been intensively utilized in educating people to embrace peace. This paper therefore, while highlighting the artist's responsibility in peace education, also discusses some of their efforts in this respect. The paper also examines some artworks that address the theme of peace. The paper in examining the artworks, applies the stylistic and iconographic approaches. Artworks have served social ends – from heavy-handed propaganda to more subtle persuasion and didactic art. In treating the theme of peace in their works, artists use symbols and motifs which people are often familiar with.*

### **Introduction**

Peace, in its broad sense, is defined as the absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering and violence, and about peaceful co-existence. It has to do primarily with creating and maintaining a just order in society and the resolution of conflict by non-violent means. This peace is further categorized by many peace researchers to include peace as the absence of war (absence of direct violence), peace as justice and development (absence of structural violence), peace as Gaia (balance in and with the ecosphere), inner peace (spiritual peace) and peace as “wholeness” and “making whole” (Francis, 2006, pp.17-18). As beautiful as peace is, man has not allowed himself to enjoy real peace. There are numerous cases of religious intolerance, violence, genocide, wars etc. threatening human's corporate existence, not only in Africa but in many other parts of the world (Gbaden, 2001).

For instance, in the last two decades as reported by Okebukola (2006, p.vii), the West African sub-region has been plagued by intra-state conflicts. Ethnic and religious clashes were common in most countries in the sub-region, with some escalating to full scale civil wars, as in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, bringing with it death, destruction and despair to the citizenry. Okebukola therefore insisted that to promote development in the West African sub-region, there must be peace, not just peace as defined by “the absence of war” or some form of détente but as an atmosphere of tolerance, harmonious co-existence and mutual development, an atmosphere where peoples are not only aware of their differences but are also understanding and willing to live and work together. That has been the idea of peace as contained in the Swahili word: Ubuntu.

Throughout history, the development of new weapons went slowly until the 20th century which has produced an avalanche of weapons. When the First World War began in 1914, the armies of Europe included men on horseback, armed with lances. Today, with the help of satellite sensors and computerized guidance systems, missiles can deliver death to any part of the earth, with astonishing accuracy. The intervening years have been the development and perfecting of guns, tanks, submarines, warplanes, biological and chemical weapons and, of course, “the bomb” (Awake, 1999, p.3). The warning given by John F. Kennedy, one time American president, during his life time, which says that “mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind”, must be heeded to (as cited in Awake, 1999, p.5).

Interestingly, the UNESCO Charter helped to make the invaluable point that since wars originate from the minds of men (and women), it is in the same minds that the defences of peace, must be constructed. This, therefore, means that everyone must be educated and enlightened about peace. Peace Education is now a priority of UN policy, the Council of Europe and Ministries of Education, various universities throughout the world, as well as NGOs. There appears to be a Global Campaign for Peace Education (Gumut, 2006). The artist of the 21st century has a big role to play in this peace education. This is because art does not merely portray aesthetics. Art provokes thoughts about morality and human polity (Gbaden, 2001). However, this aspect of the visual image has not been intensively utilized in educating people to embrace peace. There is therefore the need to engage the skill of the artist. This paper, while highlighting the artist's responsibility in peace education, discusses some of their efforts in this respect. The paper also examines some artworks that address the theme of peace. The aim is to motivate all artists to be part of this task and encourage those already doing their part to intensify their efforts in educating people about peace.

### **The Artist's Responsibility in Peace Education**

In the assertion of one of Ethiopia's foremost artists, Aferwerk Tekle,

creative endeavour can transform the world... and it is very important that we win lasting peace. Survival and happiness through creation is our reply to the grave threat looming over the world. We concentrated on the artist's role in the present world. I think that each honest artist

must be concerned for the future of humanity and our planet... We, the artists, must remember that we should glorify the ideas of humanism, peace and unity so that all nations and politicians heed our calls” (New Dawn, 1986, p.10).

Tekle made these statements during an international meeting of cultural workers from 10 countries held in Frunze in Kirghizia, a Soviet Central Asian Republic in 1986. It was the year that was proclaimed as the International Year of Peace by the UN General Assembly. The above statement by Tekle underscores the role of the artist plays in bringing about peace in the world. The artist of the 21st century should not therefore sit back watching man’s inhumanity to man. As Gbaden (2001, p.73) just like Wole Soyinka, states: “the soul of the artist dies who keeps silent in the face of tragedy”.

In the past, artists have in some way helped to graphically portray the messages of peace and conflict. They have used the creativity in them to help in depicting ills of war and the beauty of peace, and how persons can be channeled to love and pursue non-violence (Gumut, 2006). For instance, Picasso created *Guernica* (1930) to propagate the hazards of civil war in Spain as well as the Ossip Zadlane war in motivating the piles in reconstructing Rotterdam after the Second World War (Erimona, 2006 p.2). The consortium of the arts formed in June 12, 1960 championed by the poet, Atukwei Okai also benefitted Ghana and Ghanaians greatly. The artists, some of which include: Tetteh, Menyah, Acham and Boateng expressed their sentiments in their artworks about the social misdeeds and called for intervention and redress in order to pave way for peace to reign in Ghana. Through these efforts, corruption in diverse forms, graft and greed as well as other social vices were kept at a distance. The artworks served as agents of publicity which brought to the notice of the people acts of injustice, oppression or maladministration that a government would otherwise have hidden away (Menyah, 2001).

### **Some Artworks on the Theme of Peace**

One of such works, *The Cry for Global Peace* (fig.1) is by Tobenna Okwuosa (b.1972). It is a sculpture piece of 25ft high produced in 1996. The work is the artist’s contribution in the campaign by well-meaning men and women of different generations to achieve a greater peace in which everyone

could live in a peaceful environment. In this work, the artist explores more of geometric shapes in its rendition.

Fig 1: Tobenna Okwuosa, *The Cry for Global Peace*, 1996. Cast in Concrete, 22ft. Location: University of Benin Campus, Benin City



Natural forms are actually broken down into geometric forms. So, it is a semi-abstract cubistic sculpture. The medium of the work is concrete and metal. It comprises of two reclining figures and a globe. The two figures: one in front and the other behind. The one at the front represents the developed/rich countries of the world such as Britain, USA, Soviet Union while the one behind represents the underdeveloped/poor countries or rather the developing countries of the world.

Everyone, no matter his position, whether rich or poor, developed or underdeveloped, desires for peace; so the one in the front represents those

developed/rich countries. It has the left hand in abstract that thrust into the air. It stretches out into the air in demand for peace. The artist made the hand long enough so that everyone could see it. The decorative motifs on this hand are derived from the African design repertoire. They are basically geometric and curvilinear designs. The poor countries represented by the figure behind is just giving support because Tobenna the artist believes that in the area of peace, you find out that the funding of whatever conferences are often catered for and borne by the rich countries. They are actually in the forefront and we are being integrated into the struggle. The ivory bracelet is an object used by the Aristocratic members of the society in dressing. So the artist has embellished the figure in the front, which represents the rich countries with these traditional icons of richness and corpulence, to distinguish them from the rest in interpreting this rather global concept and struggle.

Basically, the hollow space in the body of the sculpture is just there as a negative space to create a visual easiness that breaks that bulkiness of the form within that section of the sculpture. The colour, red, painted on the sculpture symbolizes the absence of peace. That what we have is conflict and bloodshed everywhere. That is why we are crying for global peace. In both figures, the only suggestion we have of the human or facial features to indicate that cry is just the mouths that are open or holed up.

This sculpture is mounted in the Sculpture Garden of the University of Benin, Benin City. The choice of such great height by the artist is to enable his message to be heard by all. The height connotes the loudness of the cry for peace which will definitely draw the attention of people. According to Tobenna, “serious issues demand very serious engagement or monumental size. This is a very serious issue that we are all very concerned about. Because without peace we would have no progress as individuals, talk less of having real progress as nations. Based on that, I felt that this piece needs brave size. Just as the mast for radio station so that it can get across to people”.

Another powerful artwork that bothers on the theme of peace is by Papa Ibra Tall (b.1931) of Senegal. It is titled *Peace Will Come* (fig.2). The work is rather a prediction or an anticipation of peace in the future. Tall, through this work, shows us the beauty peace and corporate existence. It is a tapestry piece. In this piece, a peacock with its radiant feathers spread, perches on the head of a female figure that is seated on the left hand side of the picture.

There are beads and bangles on her waist and wrist respectively while her body is decorated with traditional motifs and floral designs. The fingers of her right hand almost touch the toes of her right leg. Behind the figure on the left is a bird and a fish. The head of the fish connects the bird through a platform. The flower near her right hand radiates upwards to the left hand which is raised up, and terminates under the attire of another female figure up on the right.

Fig.2: Papa Ibra Tall, *Peace Will Come*. Tapestry. Courtesy: M.M. Mount's African Art: The Years Since 1920



This figure is seated close to the peacock, with one hand merging with the peacock's body. As usual or typically with Tall, he adorns his figures in modern costumes of ancient origin by combining the flowing robes of the Senegalese garb with the floral luxury of his environment in perfect polyrhythmic unity. At once his designs are of effect to the embroidery



patterns so familiar in the robes, boubas, and dejellabas of Senegal. But they are so elegantly expressed with gestures of linear geometry that differ from the familiar symbolic designs in interpretations. It is different because it is the unique creation of Papa Ibra Tall, the painter and tapestry weaver.

Naturally as a Senegalese whose background is full of “decorative and beautiful things” Tall’s immediate inspiration comes from within his environment. The face of the female figure on the left is delineated in mask profile, suggesting the respect for the rewarding merits of his ancestral aesthetic traditions. But it is free, humane, active and eloquently expressed. As Fosu rightly stated, “whether the work reveals images of a young beautiful maiden or respectful matron, they capture the sentiments reflective of the Senegalese Wolof, the Makunde, the Mende, the Soso and the Fulani. These are the representatives of the Senegalese people united by a diverse cultural heritage” (1993, p.133).

Tall employs lines and curves to cover great distances and space in this composition. Every image or line in the work is linked or connected to the other. This connectivity in addition to the beautiful decoration of the work certainly suggests the beauty of peaceful co-existence. As rightly stated by Jamie Malan, “every single human being only becomes a truly human being by means of relationship with other beings” (Cited in Francis, 2006, p.26). Tall is optimistic that with unity, peace will certainly come to the earth. As many with artists, Tall shares the view of Tekle of Ethiopia who said, “if an artist does not believe in a better future, what is the purpose of his work then?” (Cited in New Dawn, 1986, p.10). But an artist has to create message of peace to sensitize the people, “for the artist’s weapon (tool) is art, where solutions can be found” (Gbaden, 2001, p.70). By using the female figures, one could surmise that Tall is acknowledging the role women play in peace making. It is becoming increasingly accepted that women have unique opportunities for conflict resolution due to the unique role they play in society (Mutunga, 2006, p. 369).

Haig David-West is another artist who has also treated the theme of peace in his work. *No More Aggression* (fig.3) is a painting by the artist.

Fig.3: Haig David-West, *No More Aggression*. Print on Paper, 100 cm x 70cm. Courtesy: The Nucleus





The work depicts a hand holding out a bird that appears like a dove. The Black Hand changes colour as it reaches the legs of the bird which comfortably surmounts it. In between are geometric designs. The geometric decoration is typical of the Uli floral design of the Igbo culture. This may have been his own way of expressing the Uli influence at Nsukka where he lectured (Chukueggu, 1998, p.126). The artist instead of giving peace as the title of the work prefers the title, *No More Aggression*. This may be intentional. It is perhaps to enable him deliver the message from the angle of his experiences. The artist, a Kalabari Izon, is of the Niger Delta, a region associated with aggression; acts of militancy and restiveness. Though this was a recent phenomenon, the artist might have experienced related phenomena in the region at that time. For that reason he has used his art to propagate the elimination of aggression in the region. To effectively portray this, the artist used red to signify aggressiveness which often leads to danger and grief as is also symbolized by the Black Hand. But the centre of interest is the white dove. White is a symbol of peace. It is also a symbol of victory – victory of peace over aggression.

Tall's *Peace Will Come* and that of David-West's *No More Aggression* are visual expressions or interpretations of what the inspired Prophet Isaiah

foretold, stating that “people (humans) in a government to come, will not learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). This is a belief also held and preached by Jehovah’s Witnesses Worldwide, that by means of a worldwide educational programme, people will learn to live in peace and thus “beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning shears” (as cited in Awake 2002, p.9).

Other artworks, such as *Peace, Please* and *Avoid Collapse Give Peace a Chance* are Manasseh Imonikebe’s (b.1957) visual messages to the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Imonikebe is one artist who has also made efforts in educating his people on the need for peace through visual images. His paintings are rendered in the impressionistic idiom. Through these works and others which he has created, the artist warns, advises and in some cases, gives suggestions for the solution to the problem in the region. The artist believes that after a thorough interpretation of these artworks the messages encoded in the artworks would have been passed to the people (Imonikebe, 2000). Some of the works of these artists discussed above have been exhibited in different parts of the world, such as Europe, USA, Asia and many African countries.

### Conclusion

Visual artworks, as rightly stated by Stokstad (1995, p.24), are the most sophisticated forms of human communication, at once shaping and shaped by the social context in which they find expression. They have also been enlisted to serve social ends in forms that range from heavy-handed propaganda to the more subtle persuasiveness and inspiring and instructive art. When people behold an art piece directly or perceptively, whether it is naturalistic, abstract or expressive in its rendition, they attempt to unravel the mysteries usually contained in the symbols and motifs.

Images tell us a lot about issues. Where images project ideas, we can infer a mutuality of perception as in viewing from the same perspective (Egonwa, 2007). In treating the theme of peace in their works, these artists have used symbols and motifs which the people are often familiar with. In pursuance of this noble goal, artists have shown themselves as people who are conscious of their collective conscience as artists empowered with a mandate to reverse mankind’s retrogression. It is of utmost importance therefore, that artists hold onto this noble responsibility until peace reigns again in our lands (Gbaden, 2001).

It is therefore necessary for government sponsorship of mobile exhibitions that can be driven across various countries through streets, market places, hospitals, parks and educational institutions, as suggested by Menyah (2001). In addition to that, artworks with such themes should be mounted in public places. This would be of immense impact, especially in those hostile regions. Artists should know that they hold the key to a better society.

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