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Artistic Expressions as Conflicts Resolution Process: A Study of Selected Works

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts occur within and between nations, societies, and individuals—and for this reason; conflicts resolution also thrives on artistic expressions and cultural productions which are also found in societies. This essay examines the role of artistic expressions in conflicts resolution and significantly views it as a process. This is because while works of art may not immediately instil peace, they have the propensity to initiate conversations, actions, and re-actions which could eventually lead to peace-building. In

this essay, artistic expressions are limited to poetry and music and focuses on excerpts from the poetry of Ben Okri, Uche Peter Umez, Audre Lorde, and the musical works of Nigerian All Star Ensemble, The Beatles, and Todd Rundgren whose artistic works have direct thematic relevance to this discourse.

Key words: *Art, Conflict, Conflicts Music, Peace, Peace-building, Poetry, Resolution*

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Theoretical Background: An Introduction

For many years, a significant number of research scholars in diverse academic disciplines have been propelled to engage in peace and conflicts resolution studies and research in response to conflicts, wars, displacements, and other inhuman conditions in many parts of the world. In effect, some of these studies not only serve historical purposes for posterity, but also catalyses the process of understanding conflicts, conflicts resolution, and peace processes in order to restore and promote peaceful co-existence in communities and nations. First, it is imperative to understand that conflicts and conflicts resolution are distinct in meaning and significations. Wallenstein in Okorie (2016, p.17) argues that “conflict is derived from the Latin word ‘conflictus’ which means to clash or engage in a fight. It is therefore a confrontation between one or more parties with clashing, irreconcilable or competing interest.” O’Connell (2010) views conflict as an outcome of economic inequality and social disparity which leads to violence (p.2). In addition, Burton in O’Connell (2010, p13) argues that “whatever the definition we have of conflict, wherever we draw the line, right down to family violence, we are referring to situations in which there is a breakdown in relationships and a challenge to norms and authorities.” Ajayi & Buhari (2014) argue that although there is no single definition of conflict in the African context, conflicts could mean rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assaults, chieftaincy and boundary disputes (p.140). These views suggest that beyond confrontations between two parties, there must be causes of confrontations which are often followed by harsh outcomes and repercussions. From O’Connell’s view, the most common repercussion is violence which, in a bid to resolve and end its effects, conflicts resolution process is engaged in order to restore peace. Here, I would argue that considering Burton’s view, conflicts are not exclusively limited to confrontations between two nations or communities, but can also exist in the smallest unit of the society—which is the family, and even exist within individual persons. Conflicts resolution comes as a process that institutes peace among conflicting individuals, families, societies, and/or nations.

Burton in O’Connell (2010) posits that “Conflict resolution is, in the long term, a process of change in political, social and economic systems. It is an analytical and problem solving process that takes into account such individual and group needs such as identity and recognition, as well as institutional changes that are required to satisfy these needs” (p.13). Okorie (2016, p. 28) takes this definition further by proposing that conflicts resolution is guided by three significant worldviews which include The Harvard Approach, The Human Needs Theory Approach, and The Conflict Transformation Approach. Okorie further argues that “conflict resolution is therefore important in not only bringing warring or hostile parties to a negotiation table, but is an important prelude to building lasting peace between former adversaries” pp.27-28. Ajayi & Buhari (2014, p.152) argue that “conflict resolution promotes consensus-building, social bridge reconstructions, and the re-enactment of order in the society.” In addition, Hagg & Kagwanja (2008, p.21) argue that “in a number of instances, conflicts resolution initiatives based on the liberal peace principles have brought an end to violent conflict and created platforms for reconciliation.” From all propositions and arguments by these scholars, one of the significant points is that conflicts resolution is a process for restoration of peace. However, some have argued that the mere absence of war or conflict does not suggest the existence of peace (see Okorie

2016; Wallensteen 2002). According to Okorie (2016, p.8), “peace is now measured by how state citizens living in a country are compared to other societies.” From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that being a process; some of the conflicts resolutions strategies do not in themselves guarantee peace. Rather, they introduce a platform for negotiations, deliberations, and in some cases, pleading to the conscience and minds of conflicting groups to resolve their differences. For instance, there have been cases where warring nations ended up in another bloodier war after peace talks and signing of peace treaties (see Okorie 2016; Wallensteen 2002).

This essay examines the role of artistic expressions which, in their own rights, are works of imagination and cultural production—as a process of resolving conflicts and restoring peace. This means that while these works of art may not in themselves bring immediate resolutions to conflicts, they are catalysts of peace and their roles cannot be downplayed in societies where works of imagination and cultural productions hold forth. To be clear, artistic expressions referred to in this essay are poetry and music. This essay will focus on the poetry of Ben Okri, Uche Peter Umez, Audre Lorde, and the musical works of Nigerian All Star Ensemble, The Beatles, and Todd Rundgren because of their works’ have thematic relevance in this discourse.

Artistic expressions in conflicts resolution: a process

Artistic expressions which have direct relevance in the resolution of conflicts affirm the functional role of works of art. While the Art for Art’s sake theorists and proponents argue for art works to be self-sufficient and non-utilitarian, there are other schools of thought who not only argue for the functionality of art works, but also engage in the production of such works which add values in societies. I would argue that both music and poetry, beyond being artistic, sometimes mirrors a society and critically engages in discourses that will effect positive change and transformation. Nduka (2013) affirms this proposition by arguing that poets and musicians are artists who are also concerned and influenced by events that stir up their imagination and creativity (p.133). In effect, a poet or musician who lives in a conflict area or war-torn zone might be inspired to create works that will speak against the inhuman conditions and deaths that occur in the area. In this case, the artist becomes a voice for people whose voices may be barely heard in such conditions. Galtung in Senehi (2002) argues that “one of the main goals for peace activists is to facilitate and amplify the voices of those who are not being heard” P.42. On this premise, the poet or musician becomes or serves as a peace activist considering his works of art which promotes peace. This also underscores the significant place of arts in peace activism. Senehi (2002, p.42) argues that “since the inception of peace studies and conflict resolution fields, theorists and practitioners have recognized the significance of both imagination and an analysis of culture for understanding social conflicts and their resolution”. Jessica Senehi’s argument validates the place of artistic works as products of imagination in the process of conflicts resolution. With reference to culture and cultural understanding, in a sense, artistic works are products of culture in the sense that there are socio-cultural ideologies embedded in them (see Nduka 2016; Steinholt 2003; Onuora-Oguno 2013; Hawkins 1996; Asigbo & Okeke 2014; Okafor 2005; Nzewi 2007). Artistic responses to conflicts takes advantage of cultural and cross-cultural significations to appeal to conflicting groups, create understanding, and introduce the process of peace restoration. Senehi (2002) reports that ‘in Mozambique, the

UNICEF-funded “circle of peace” used traditional music, art, and drama to teach peace-building to children” p.51. In addition, Shenk (2002) reports that Lederach and Herm Weaver have used stories and songs as what they refer to as “small response” to terrorism and war in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US. While they may consider their response to be “small”, audiences who listen to their creative works will find them useful to an extent, thus, contributing to the process of peace promotion. Jessica Senehi also tells a story of how a high school changed the world by reaching out to Middle Easterners in their community after listening to a story performed as a song and accompanied with musical instruments by Lederach. This response by the students affirms the efficacy of an artistic work in peace-building, basic human understanding and relationships, and reconciliation.

Presenting a critical discourse on Albanian songs and the efficacy of music in peace-building, Sugarman (2010) reports:

Wars require that communities overlook differences in background and orientation so as to act as a united group. In this respect, the Albanian songs and music videos produced during the Kosova war are instructive for the ways in which they forged a sense of national purpose by eliding or mystifying social differences” p.18.

Sugarman’s report clearly demonstrates a situation where music serves the purpose of uniting people in order to scale through a war situation. This could be as a result of how music appeals to human emotions and functions as a result of emotional reactions from people (see Meyer 1956). On the whole, works of art are significant in conflicts resolution process because of their place in the society as imaginative works and cultural products which appeals to an audience.

Poetry and conflicts resolution

From the foregoing, the place of poetry in conflicts resolution process is palpable. Over the years, poets have produced works in response to conflicts where they advocate for peace, mutual understanding, reconciliation, and appreciation of peace. For the purpose of this paper, excerpts of poems from collections of poems by Ben Okri, Uche Peter Umez, and Audre Lorde, will be discussed briefly in order to ascertain their relevance in the discourse.

WILD—BEN OKRI

Example 1: THE SCREAMER

Three days after the massacre
In Jenin, with the bulldozed dead
Under the rubble and men shot
Down and children blinded
By the blast of tanks
That crushed their frail houses
Into powder and blood,
And a man in a hot room
Howling for two white days
With no-one to help him,
And with the town blocked off

So that the massacre
Could be unleashed without
Any foreign witnesses,
Entering legend by rumours,
 And grief only; three days
 Afterwards, when the air
 Of the world was poisoned
 With silence and complicity,
 The superpowers stood
 By and watched with eyes
 Averted from the future
 Catastrophe that would be born
 From the unforgettable rage. (p.29)

Example 2: THE WORLD IS RICH

Terror is there, no doubt:
Violence, hunger and drought;
Rivers that no longer
Flow to the sea.
It's the shadow of humanity.

There's terror in the air.
And we have put it there.
We have made God into an enemy,
Have made God into a weapon,
A poverty, a blindness, an army.

But the world is rich with
Great love unfound:
Even in the terror
There is love, twisted round
And round. Set it free

River, flow to the sea. (p.35)

From the two poems above, Ben Okri demonstrates an awareness of the world's civil unrest, terrorism, violence, and humanity's reactions to such conditions. I would argue that the admission and identification of conflict is part of the process of resolution in the sense that the peace-building process often has a focus on identifiable critical areas. In Example 1, Okri raises a critical issue about violence and reports that no resolutions have taken place because of neglect by the powers that be. Where he writes: "And a man in a hot room/Howling for two white days" clearly demonstrates the effects of violence on humanity. That "man" in the poem is a metaphor for people who suffer as a result of conflicts and violence in any part of the world. In Example 2, the author blames humanity for terror and argues that some religious practices have brought more enmity amongst

people. Consider a situation where some Christians pray to God to “kill and destroy” fellow humans considered to be enemies, thereby making God into an enemy and a weapon, according to the poem. Okri insists that the world is habitable and peaceful even in the face of violence. The paradox is resolved in the last line where he declares: “River, flow to the sea”. This is an implicit call for peace in a world full of terror.

ARIDITY OF FEELINGS—UCHE PETER UMEZ

Example 3: OF THIS WORLD

We only have one chance
 To build peace
 A fortress for the mothers and children—
 Where no killing chemicals, or blood-thirsty bullets,
 Or any despot drunk with power-dregs
 Stifle the soul to nothingness.

O, we only have but one precious chance
 To make this world a quiet and loving place
 And only this one world
 Entrusted to us.

From example 4 above, the poet calls for peace-building. Here, most significant is the simplicity and accessibility of his verses in order to pass his message more effectively. Drawing from my earlier argument, while this may not immediately instill peace, the creative work or artistic expression serves as a process that aims to restore peace. The effectiveness of this work lies in its accessibility in the public domain. The poem transcends a call for peace. It is also a call for introspection and self-awareness which, in a sense, are catalysts for peace-building. With the poem, Uche Peter Umez has succeeded in adding his voice to all the voices calling for peace in the world.

THE BLACK UNICORN—AUDRE LORDE

Example 4: A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL

For those of us who live at the shoreline
 standing upon the constant edges of decision
 crucial and alone
 for those of us who cannot indulge
 the passing of dreams of choice
 who love doorways coming and going
 in the hours between dawns
 looking inward and outward
 at once before and after
 seeking a now that can breed
 futures
 like bread in our children’s mouths
 so their dreams will not reflect
 the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
This instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive. (p.31)

From example 5 above, Audre Lorde, being a black lesbian feminist living in the United States at a time when Black oppression was at its peak, she fought back oppression, intimidations, and all unfairness with artistic works of poetry, prose, and essays. In this poem, she draws the attention of readers to fear as a weapon of oppression and violence. A people who succumb to fear are easily defeated mentally, psychologically, and physically. The use of fear on a people (whether minority or not) creates conflict. Audre Lorde refers to the oppressors as "heavy-footed" where she writes: "the heavy-footed hoped to silence us". The poem directly addresses the "oppressed" by stating their fears and urging them to speak up, oppose violence, and do away with fear. In the very last verse of the poem, the author writes "So it is better to speak/remembering we were never meant to survive/". Speaking to oppressors and taking the role of amplifying the voices of oppressed people is activism—and with this work, Audre Lorde's role as an activist is rightfully asserted. There could be two or more connotations to the word "survival" in the work's context. One is freedom, and the other is death. Freedom is sometimes vague, and death is the end of all mortals. In essence, even if a people are set free from oppression, they will still die one day. This argument validates Audre Lorde's last verse which is an apt summary and crux of the poem. On the whole, while her activism may not readily enact peace, speaking against fear as violence begins the process.

MUSIC & CONFLICTS RESOLUTION

From time immemorial, music has been—and continues to be one of the mediums of artistic expressions that serve many purposes. Being a product of culture within a society, it continues to serve as one of the veritable instruments for preaching and promoting peaceful co-existence amongst communities, societies, and nations as a result of people's connection to a musical work's discourse schema. For the purpose of this study and based on an argument by Danaher (2005, p.1453) where the author states that "song lyrics are important in capturing the feelings and reactions of singers to the world around them and can contribute to social change", I would limit the discussion of song excerpts from Nigerian All Star Ensemble, The Beatles, and Todd Rundgren to their lyrics alone.

NIGERIAN ALL STAR ENSEMBLE
Example 5: A SONG FOR PEACE
With peace we don't have to grieve

When peace reigns fear goes out the door
With peace we can work out our differences
Put an end to all the hate...

Wake up everybody
It's time to build a new day
Enough is enough
Let's put the past behind us
It's only when there's peace
That we can build a new Nigeria
Enough is enough
Let's give peace a chance.

From Example 6 above, some Nigerian pop musicians came together to perform as an ensemble and most significantly, to use their music for the promotion of peace in Nigeria. The song, in essence, is a response to aching divisions along religious, ethnic, political, and ideological lines which for many years, has led to loss of life and properties, neglect, nepotism, unfair treatments, and all forms of violence. The song is clearly a wakeup call for peace and resolution of conflicts in order to establish a nation devoid of any form of violence.

THE BEATLES

Example 6: WE CAN WORK IT OUT
Life is very short
And there's no time
For fussing and fighting, my friend.

While you see it your way
There's a chance that we might
Fall apart before too long
We can work it out
We can work it out

From the excerpt, the song pleads to the conscience of an enemy (or a conflicting group), seeking to settle their differences. The repetition on "We can work it out" places emphasis on the statement and plea, thereby presenting it as the discourse schema and crux of the work. It is an acceptance by one of the conflicting parties that there is need for conflict resolution. In this context, working it out is a process for restoration of peace and underscores the argument that conflicts resolution is a process.

TODD RUNDGREN

Example 7: CAN WE STILL BE FRIENDS?
Let's admit we made a mistake but
Can we still be friends?
Heartbreak's never easy to take but

Can we still be friends?

It's a strange, sad affair
Sometimes, seems like we just don't care
Don't waste time feeling hurt
We've been through hell together

Can we still be friends?

Can we still be friends?

From example 8 above, there are two characters in conflict, and one is asking for resolution by extending a hand of friendship. The third line of the first verse where the musician sings "Heartbreak's never easy to take" gives a clue about the conflict. There is betrayal or breach of trust resulting in conflict which the character seeks to resolve. On the whole, the song's discourse schema is relevant to this discourse because it focuses on conflicts between two individuals (or groups) where one extends a hand of friendship in a bid to resolve their conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Music and poetry as artistic expressions and cultural products play significant roles in the process of conflict resolution. As I have argued so far, these roles do not necessarily enact peace but have the propensity of initiating awareness, conversations, actions, and reactions that could eventually lead to resolution of conflicts. Where there are conflicts, artistic expressions have been used to preach against violence and to promote peace, stability, and progress. It is pertinent to note that these artistic expressions are however amplified and promoted by the media which includes printing and publishing, radio, television, and other platforms of production. These, in a sense, promote artistic works and ensure that these works reach a wider audience in order to be effective. In this context, a further study could present a comparative analysis of the efficacy of these media platforms in the promotion of artistic expressions and cultural products such as music, poetry, paintings, sculpture, and other forms of art.

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