

Religion Versus Politics; Art as a Symbiotic Pivot for Mutuality

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Abstract

In view of the current situation in Nigeria regarding religious and sociopolitical affiliations, the divisive reservations and prevailing narrative among the average Nigerian citizen is concerning and calls for staged interventions. This paper therefore presents art as a Public Intervention and a symbiotic pivot for mutuality. Some have used religion to create enmity among loving and patriotic citizens of this nation, Nigeria, while others have fed fat through self-serving political maneuvers and instability. An initiation of Intervention Art as a meeting point for mutuality and the stability of a lasting peaceful coexistence consequently becomes an option to explore. This paper will examine a major religious narrative of *Loving One's Neighbour as One's Self*. It will also take a look at Yusuf Grillo's works, "Post Khutba Dilema" and "Deliverance" and Best Ochigbo's concept of art which focuses on art's pan-cultural and trans-historical values, as represented in his work, "Chibok, Bring Back Our Girls," which forms the focal point of this paper. In conclusion, it is hoped that in the final analysis, this paper would have delved into the intrigues of religious bigotry and political manipulative resonance, shedding light on workable mutuality which can be tantamount to instituting long lasting peace and tolerance among all.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Art Intervention, Symbiotic, Mutuality

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Background to the Study

Art has always been recognized as a great instrument for transformation socially. From the cartoons in the newspapers that help in the promotion of peace and tranquility to the sculptures and paintings in private and public spaces, which are used to raise awareness about environmental issues, in addition to propagating aesthetics. Barbu, Z (1970.15) alludes that consciously, the artists can perceive and conceptualize some aspects of his society, while unconsciously he may be aware of some other and completely different aspects of the same Society. He therefore being sensitive to religion and politics in his creativity towards being a center for peace goals. Art generally has the ability to inspire, educate, and unite people. In this paper, we will argue that arts can serve as a pivot for peace, by promoting cross-cultural understanding, fostering empathy, and encouraging peaceful dialogue. Religion and politics are often seen as two separate and opposing domains, with conflicting values and interests. While religion is concerned with spiritual and moral values, politics deals with power and governance. The relationship between the two has been marked by tension, conflict, and even violence in many parts of the world. However, art has the potential to serve as a symbiotic pivot for mutuality between religion and politics, creating a space for dialogue, understanding, and cooperation.

A subject of intense controversy and probably debate for centuries, has been the relationship between religion and politics. In this paper, we explore the role of art as a pivot for mutuality between these two seemingly opposing forces. We argue that art has the potential to bring people together, create mutual understanding, and bridge the gap between religious and political ideologies. Drawing on examples from various cultures and historical periods, we demonstrate how art can serve as a platform for dialogue, reconciliation, and social change. We also discuss the challenges and limitations of using art in this way and provide recommendations for future research and practice.

Art as a Cultural instrument

Cross-cultural understanding is essential for promoting peace, and the art has the ability to bridge cultural gaps. Art is a universal language that can be understood regardless of one's cultural background or language. By experiencing art from different cultures, people can learn about their similarities and differences, and develop a better understanding of other cultures. For example, the annual World Arts Festival in Dakar, Senegal brings together artists from around the world to celebrate their cultural traditions and exchange ideas. Through this festival, people are able to experience different art forms and gain deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage of others regardless of their race or clan, (Dakar art festival)

Empathy is another important aspect of promoting peace, and the arts can help to foster empathy by allowing people to see the world from different perspectives. Through art, people can explore the experiences of others and gain deeper understanding of their struggles and triumphs. The play "The Laramie Project" by Moises Kaufman (2000), he explores the aftermath of the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming. The play allows the audiences to gain insight into the experiences of the Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, queer or questioning persons, (LGBTQ+) community and fosters empathy for those who have experienced discrimination and violence.

The arts can encourage peaceful dialogue by providing a platform for people to express their views in a non-threatening way. Art can be used as a means of communication, allowing people to express their ideas and feelings without the fear of being judged or attacked. For example, the "Wall of Respect" (1967), a mural in Chicago, created for African American artists to express their frustrations with racial discrimination. The mural sparked a dialogue about race relations in the United States and helped to promote greater understanding between different communities.

The narrative of “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

The narrative of loving one's neighbour as oneself is a central teaching in many religious traditions. The concept is rooted in the idea that all human beings are interconnected and that we have a responsibility to care for one another. In its response, this paper explores this narrative in the context of two major religious traditions: Christianity and Judaism. In Christianity, the narrative of love your neighbor as yourself is derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, Jesus is asked by a lawyer what the greatest commandment is. Jesus responds by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (The Bible, Matthew 22:37-39)

Jesus goes on to explain that everyone is our neighbor, not just those who are like us or who we get along with. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus tells the story of a man who is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite pass by without helping him, but a Samaritan stops and cares for him, even though Samaritans and Jews were traditionally enemies. Jesus tells his listeners to go and do likewise, showing love and compassion to all, even those who are different from us.

In Nigeria, Christian/Muslim conflict is something that religious bigotry introduced to impoverish the vulnerable in the society, otherwise the core Christians and Muslims in Nigeria live in peace. Whenever art is mentioned, there is a neutrality spread among the citizens. The conference that brings us all together periodically, has a lot of Christians, Muslims and other religious sects always in attendance, where high degree of tolerance is exhibited because art is involved. In Judaism, the narrative of loving one's neighbor as oneself is found in the book of Leviticus. In chapter 19, verse 18, it says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." The term "your people" refers to fellow Jews, but the Talmud (a collection of Jewish law and tradition) expands the definition of "neighbor" to include non-Jews as well.

In Jewish tradition, the narrative of loving one's neighbor as oneself is often expressed through the concept of *tikkun olam*, which means "repairing the world." This idea emphasizes the importance of social justice and caring for those in need. The Talmud teaches that "all Israel are responsible for one another," meaning that it is the responsibility of all Jews to care for each other and work together for the common good. In both Christianity and Judaism, the narrative of loving one's neighbor as oneself emphasizes the interconnectedness of all human beings and the importance of showing love and compassion.

Yusuf Grillo

Yusuf Grillo made significant contributions to the development of modern art in Nigeria. Born on September 3, 1934, in Lagos, Nigeria, Grillo was one of the first Nigerian artists to receive formal training in art, studying at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology in Zaria from 1953 to 1956, (now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria). He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1959 to 1963 and was equally one of the most popular and famous stained-glass artists in Nigeria. Grillo's early works were heavily influenced by Western art, and he often used geometric shapes and bright colors in his paintings. However, he incorporated elements of traditional Nigerian art into his work, including Yoruba mythology and symbolism. His works are in styles that blend elements of traditional arts with modernist techniques. Grillo worked also with bold colours and geometric forms as well as its incorporation of Yoruba symbols and myths.

In addition to his work as a painter, Grillo has also had a significant impact on the development of art education in Nigeria. He served as the head of the Department of Art and Printing at Yaba College of Technology in Lagos from 1978 to 1985, and later as the director of the National Gallery of Art in Lagos from 1994 to 1999. He has also served as a mentor to many young Nigerian artists and has been instrumental in promoting the development of contemporary art in Nigeria. Grillo received numerous awards and honors for his contributions to the arts, including the Nigerian National Order of Merit in 2006. His works have been exhibited in galleries and museums in Nigeria and around the world, which include exhibiting at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., and the Tate Modern in London. Today, Grillo is widely regarded as one of Nigeria's most important artists, and his works continue to inspire and influence a new generation of Nigerian artists. His contributions to the development of modern Nigerian art, as well as his dedication to art education and mentoring, have had a lasting impact on the Nigerian art.

Post Khutba Dilemma



Figure 1

Title – Post Khutba Dilemma

Artist – Yusuf Grillo

Medium – oil on canvas

Size – 53.5” x 24”

Date – 2009 – 2012

"Post Khutba Dilemma", (Yusuf Grillo, 1969) The painting is an example of Grillo's signature style, which combines elements of traditional Yoruba art with contemporary techniques and subjects. The painting features a group of figures, including men and women, standing in a line against a backdrop of a barren landscape. The figures are depicted in bold black outlines, filled in with vibrant colors such as pink, blue, and green. Some of the figures are holding objects such as bags and bowls, while others are gesturing with their hands. In a very typical expression of the drive for an inward approach to the matter, Grillo in this painting expresses a psychological inner viewpoint on a common social problem in contemporary families. He explained that "the Imam is unaware of the lower ground in front of him, hence the wife is preventing him from continuing the pursuit". In as much as individuals are working on their areas of weakness, there is also the collective weakness of nations to be addressed. Grillo's use of bold colors and simplified forms is reminiscent of traditional Yoruba art, which often features abstracted figures and bold patterns. However, his use of these techniques in a contemporary context gives the painting a fresh and modern feel. The composition of the painting is also striking, with the figures arranged in a line that draws the viewer's eye across the canvas. In overall, *"Post Kutha Dilemma"* is a powerful work of art that combines traditional and contemporary elements to create a thought-provoking commentary on the social and political issues of its time.

However, there are also challenges and limitations to using art in this way. Art is not always accessible to everyone and may not reach those who need it most. It can also be misinterpreted or unintentionally divisive, reinforcing existing stereotypes and prejudices. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the context and audience when using art as a pivot for mutuality. This painting is coded with moral lessons and criticism of man's temptations in time of weakness.

Yusuf Grillo's "Deliverance"



Figure 2
Tittle – Deliverance
Artist – Yusuf Grillo
Medium – Oil on canvas
Date – 1994 – 2015

The painting, *Deliverance* by Yusuf Grillo, is a representation of a religious activity captioned deliverance, an oil on canvas painting he executed from 1994 to 2015. The love to be part of helping out in someone's life led to the action of conducting the deliverance on the subject. The state of vehemence written on the faces of the parishioners praying for the subject, brings to mind the zeal to have a great society. The expression on the face of the figure at the foreground, shows a pensive but determined mood to getting the subject delivered, therefore achieving the desired result. The faces of all the figures in the surrounding backdrop (of the main foreground figures) can be seen to be staring toward the upper left corner of the canvas when this picture is closely examined in depth. The majority of early master paintings feature the use of such striking spotlights. It offers a sense of purpose, mystery, suspense, and the expansiveness of a piece of art while also conveying optimism, hope, and the expectation of the unknowable. This suspense makes the audience a participating observer, suggesting a constant estimate of the outcome, similar to the theatrical lighting of an opera stage. Art in this space directs empathy towards the subject. Art speaks volumes in critical interventions.

Best Ochigbo's *Bring back our Girls*.

Bring Back Our Girls; a phenomenon that epitomizes the prevailing condition and systematic degenerated form of the Nigerian civilization and existential reality of its citizens. It was on the calamitous night of 14th to 15th April, 2014, at Chibok, Borno State in Nigeria, where 276 female students were abducted from Government Girls Secondary School by a recognized terrorist group based in Northern Nigeria and some bordering countries known as Boko Haram. The girls who were mostly Christians were aged between 15 to 18 years. Till date, over a hundred of the Chibok girls are yet to be accounted for as reported by Dauda Iliya, the President of The Kibaku (Chibok) Area Development Association (KADA) in Premium Times (2022). He further reported that the Chibok school abduction was not a one-off incident; the Chibok community has continued to be on the receiving end of persistent barrage of attacks and all kinds of criminality without any tangible intervention by the Nigerian government. Undoubtedly, the Chibok community has been abandoned by the Nigerian government. As stated by Amnesty International (2023), this notorious group has been responsible for series of abductions of females at different locations in Northern Nigeria after the Chibok occurrence, revealing the unmitigated negligence and absolute failure of the Nigerian government to pick up from the Chibok abductions and protect its citizens. According to Sanusi (2023), the Acting Director of Amnesty International, this issue stems from the unaccountability and ineffective response by the Nigerian government in handling the Chibok girls' kidnappings fuelling anarchy and impunity. Cases of rape, torturing, forced marriages, killings, forceful conversion to other religious sects, prisoner swaps and exchanges, negotiations involving huge financial ransoms and so many other gruesome accounts surrounding these female abductions abound. This is in spite of planned or proposed humanitarian interventions by international communities.

The Chibok abduction sparked a global outrage which led to physical and social media campaigns across diverse platforms worldwide and the emergence of the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls and the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) movement. The BBOG movement is a diverse coalition group consisting of global citizens which advocate for the

release of victims of abduction and demand for the speedy rescue of all the unaccounted abducted Chibok girls and quashing of the prevailing insurgency in Nigeria. Notable proponents and convener of the movement and campaign group include the former Vice President for the World Bank and former Minister of Education in Nigeria, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili (@obyzeeks) and #EndSars icon, socio-political reformer and educator Aisha Yesufu. Notable personages who joined the global BBOG campaign include Hillary Clinton, Barack and Michelle Obama. Thus, the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls became a global phenomenon for the manumission of the kidnapped Chibok girls and every other female accordingly represented.



Figure 3

Michelle Obama

First Lady of the United States of America from 2009 to 2017.

Source: New York Post, May 10, 2014

Simon Best Ochigbo's "Chibok, Bring Back Our Girls"



Figure 4

Title - Simon Best Ochigbo (*Chibok, Bring Back Our Girls*)

Artist – Simon Best Ochigbo

Medium - Pastel

Size - 10x12cm

Date - 2014

Throughout the ages across civilizations, art has unveiled its power to bug its introspective virus in prevailing philosophies, transcend the boundaries of culture and religion and resonate across diverse social and political frontiers. This nature of art is highly significant in today's era with new digital media connecting global communities together, bringing a more connected world. Unfortunately, this global connectedness does not translate to a more unified world. On the contrary, new media has also heightened and exhibited growing social issues such as intolerance and religious bigotry. Art, defined as any man-made intervention in a natural world, is a creative expression that reflects our worldly experiences. Art is a medium through which the perceptions of our worldview are challenged. The artist's role, therefore, as a creative thinker and an agent of change across global communities, is to engage the society in critical thinking for social advancement and development, connect cultures through truthful self-expression and document epochs. Art is indeed a staged intervention to save humanity!

Simon Best Ochigbo's work titled "Chibok, Bring Back Our Girls" is an intervention art that lends its voice to the #BringBackOurGirls movement. It is an attempt to interact with its viewers by bringing focus to a pre-existing situation, the Chibok girls' abductions. The artwork stages a political protest, challenges authorities and provokes its audience to change the prevailing system. Created in the time of the Chibok abductions, it depicts with the principle of simplicity or economy, linear representations of the concept of a Chibok girl. In Ochigbo's pastel painting, she wears a hijab which is epitomised by a green curvilinear line from one end to the other at the top of the painting, as is the custom of Northern or Muslim

females or as a representation of the forced conversions of the abducted girls to Islam by the Boko Haram terrorist group. Another green circle encloses the young girl's face with a black zed symbol and a brief horizontal dash underneath to conceptualize her facial features in style with Ochigbo's minimalist approach. The background of the artwork typifies colour field paintings; it is dominantly and expansively blocked in red hue without substantial tonal gradations in its monochromatic hue. The red hue provides colour contrast to the green curvilinear lines of the subject of the composition, heightening the intensity of the composition. Green and red are a pair of complementary colour combinations; they are opposite each other on the colour wheel and therefore provide the ultimate colour contrast in compositions. Artists apply complementary colour elements to create dominance, contrast and intensity in artistic compositions. The red colour embodies itself, probably rendering significance to the urgent attention the subject of the work necessitates. The work is as simplified as it gets yet it stages a powerful statement as part of a collective movement. In an utterly disparate view to the Nigerian government, Simon Best Ochigbo finishes off the painting with his signature at the bottom right, creatively fulfilling his earthly mandate to humanity and a biblical call to *love one's neighbour as oneself*.

Religion and Politics

The intrigues of religious bigotry and political manipulative resonance are two interconnected issues that have plagued societies throughout history. While religion and politics are often thought of as separate spheres, the reality is that they are deeply intertwined, and the manipulation of one for the benefit of the other has been a common strategy employed by those seeking power and control.

Religious bigotry, which can be defined as intolerance or prejudice towards individuals or groups based on their religious beliefs or practices, is a particularly insidious form of discrimination. It can manifest in a variety of ways, from overt acts of violence and persecution to more subtle forms of exclusion and marginalization. In many cases, religious bigotry is fueled by political motivations, as politicians exploit religious differences to gain support and maintain power. One example of this can be seen in the sectarian conflicts that have plagued countries such as Iraq and Syria in recent years. These conflicts are often portrayed as being rooted in religious differences, with Sunni and Shia Muslims pitted against each other in a struggle for power and control. However, it is often the case that these conflicts are fueled by political manipulation, with politicians using religious rhetoric and symbols to mobilize their base and maintain their grip on power.

The manipulative resonance of politics and religion can also be seen in the way that politicians use religious identity to appeal to voters. This is particularly true in countries where religion plays a significant role in public life, such as the United States. Politicians often use religious language and symbols to appeal to voters and create a sense of shared identity and purpose. This can be seen in the way that some politicians use the language of Christianity to appeal to conservative voters, or the way that some Muslim politicians use the language of Islam to appeal to their base.

However, while the manipulation of religion for political gain may be effective in the short term, it has long-term consequences. It can deepen divisions within the society, fuel extremism and intolerance, and erode the very fabric of democracy. In order to combat the intrigues of religious bigotry and political manipulations, it is important to promote tolerance, have respect for diversity, and be committed to democratic values such as freedom of speech and assembly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, art serves as a symbiotic pivot for mutuality by promoting cross-cultural understanding, fostering empathy, and encouraging peaceful dialogue. By bringing together people from different cultures and allowing them to experience each other's art, we can develop a greater appreciation for the diversity of the human experience. By fostering empathy through art, we can gain a deeper understanding of the struggles and triumphs of others and develop a greater sense of compassion and connection. And by encouraging peaceful dialogue through art, we can create a safe and non-threatening space for people to express their ideas and feelings, and work towards greater understanding and cooperation. Therefore, the arts have a vital role to play in promoting peace and creating a more harmonious world.

It is also important to work towards greater understanding and dialogue between different religious and political groups, in order to build bridges and foster a sense of shared identity and purpose. Ultimately, the key to combating the intrigues of religious bigotry and political manipulation is to promote a culture of openness, inclusivity, and mutual respect, where all individuals are valued and their voices are heard.

Furthermore, art has the potential to serve as a symbiotic pivot for mutuality between religion and politics, creating a space for dialogue, understanding, and cooperation. By bringing people together and promoting mutual understanding, art can help bridge the gap between religious and political ideologies. However, it is important to be aware of the challenges and limitations of using art in this way, and to carefully consider the context and audience. Further research and practice are needed to explore the full potential of art as a pivot for mutuality between religion and politics, and to develop effective strategies for using art to promote social change and reconciliation.

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