

The Role Of Visual Art And Performing Art In Peace Building Across Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative role of fine art in peace-building across Northeast, North Central, and Northwest Nigeria, affected by insurgency, ethno-religious conflict, and rural insecurity. Through interviews with selected artists and analysis of their work, the study investigates how visual art and performance arts foster healing, dialogue, and social cohesion. The findings reveal that art serves not only as a medium of expression but also as a tool for resistance, reconciliation, and community engagement.

Keywords: Peace-building, Northern Nigeria, Insurgence, Insecurity

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, Northern Nigeria has faced escalating violence, including Boko Haram's insurgency in the Northeast, farmer-herder clashes in the North Central, and armed banditry in the Northwest. These crises have caused over 35,000 deaths and displaced more than 2 million people, deeply affecting education, livelihoods, and community cohesion (CDD, 2021, pp. 45–47; Olufemi, 2021, pp. 89–91; Ajiye, 2020, p. 112).

Government responses, primarily military operations and formal reconciliation, have had limited success, often failing to address the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by survivors (Onoja, 2015, p. 33). In Plateau State, for example, herder-related violence has led to widespread destruction and intergenerational trauma (Olufemi, 2021, p. 91).

In response to these, artists across conflict-affected regions lend their voice to this menace by, among other things, using fine art (painting, sculpture, multimedia, performance art) as tools for healing and peace-building. These artistic expressions foster empathy, preserve memory, and create safe spaces for dialogue and reconciliation (Udofia, 2025, p. 6). Initiatives like the Jos Peace Museum and the Arts & Culture Inter-Community Solidarity Activity engage diverse groups in collaborative art-making to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive narratives (PIND Foundation, 2025, pp. 7–8).

Globally, organisations like UNESCO recognise cultural production as vital to post-conflict recovery. In Nigeria, where oral and visual traditions are strong, art offers a culturally resonant

path to healing and social cohesion. It enables communities to process grief and imagine peaceful futures (Udofia, 2025, p. 6).

Historically, art has played a transformative role in social movements. South African anti-apartheid murals and Colombian memory installations exemplify how visual art can resist oppression and promote reconciliation (Baines, 2016, p. 24; Demos, 2013, p. 8). In Nigeria, scholarly focus has largely been on urban art and heritage preservation, overlooking grassroots artistic practices in conflict zones (Adeyemi, 2019, p. 147; Nwagwu, 2020, p. 90).

Recent studies highlight the peace-building potential of art in Nigeria. The “Peace Through Art” movement in Nasarawa State shows how collaborative creative work can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Onuorah, 2022, p. 186). Essien (2020) emphasises the role of rituals and symbolic art in transforming conflict, especially in rural areas (p. 78). Olushola and Olayemi (2025) argue that museums can foster dialogue and cultural understanding in politically unstable regions (p. 4). Onoja (2017) documents how visual narratives in Jos memorialise peace efforts and challenge dominant conflict stories (p. 52). Okpanachi et al., on the other hand, advocate for culturally rooted creative interventions in North-East Nigeria (p. 80).

The study integrates peace studies, visual anthropology, and cultural sociology to explore how art can reshape social norms and collective memory (Lederach & Lederach, 2010, p. 33; Pink, 2013, p. 56; Gell, 1998, p. 7). It concludes that fine arts are not merely reflective but transformative, offering grassroots, emotionally resonant alternatives to conventional peace-building frameworks.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with selected artists from Northeast, North Central, and Northwest Nigeria, alongside visual analysis of their works. The selection criteria included artists actively engaged in peace-building or social commentary. Regional balance and gender inclusivity in interviews were conducted in person and via digital platforms, with informed consent. Artworks were analysed for themes, symbolism, and community impact.

Regional Case Studies and Artist Voices

Northeast Nigeria

Josiah Philip, a mixed-media artist from Taraba State, Nigeria. His artistic journey began from a deep connection to his community and a desire to express the silent struggles around him.

Growing up in a region affected by conflict and transformation shaped how he sees materials, spaces, and human resilience. The artist uses art as a way to process memory, pain, and renewal.

Q: How would you describe the themes or messages in your work?

His art explores themes of memory, loss, resilience, and reconstruction. He is interested in how communities rise after crisis, how something broken can still hold beauty. His current series, “Ashes of Home”, embodies this spirit of transformation and remembrance.



Figure 1: Ashes of Home I; Rebirth in Rust, Josiah Philip, Medium: Steel Mild, Scrap Metal, Acrylic on canvas, Size: 18cm by 30cm, 2025, Photographer F. P. Zaure



Figure 2: Ashes of Home II; Loss, Josiah Philip, Medium: Steel Mild, Scrap Metal, Acrylic on canvas, Size: 18cm by 30cm, 2025, Photographer F. P. Zaure

Q: What kinds of conflict or social challenges have affected your community?

The artist said his community, like many in Northern Nigeria, has experienced episodes of political / cultural violence, displacement, and loss. These conflicts disrupt not just homes, but also trust, relationships, and identity; most of it all women and children are the victims.

Q: How has your art responded to these issues?

His art transforms the aftermath of conflict into creative expression. By reusing burnt and rusted materials, he rebuilds images of home and belonging, a process that mirrors emotional and communal healing. The act of creating becomes an act of peace.

Q: Can you share a specific piece or project that was inspired by conflict or aimed at healing?

One of his projects that focuses on healing in peace-building efforts is the Ashes of Home Series (Figure I). The piece was directly inspired by a village that was burned during a crisis. I collected rusted metal fragments and embedded them into canvas to represent both destruction and endurance. That work became a symbol of resilience, showing how beauty can still rise from the ruins.

Q: In what ways do you see your art contributing to peace-building?

Josiah's art serves as a visual conversation about healing. It gives form to pain but also to recovery, reminding people that rebuilding is possible. Art opens a space for empathy and reflection where words may not reach.

Q: How do audiences, especially those affected by conflict, respond to your work?

Many people feel emotionally connected viewing the art piece. They see their own experiences reflected in the textures and tones. Some say the work gives them hope and relief that it speaks to our process of healing.

Q: Have you seen any changes or impact resulting from your art?

At times the art piece speaks through as decoded conversation and reflection. We have seen our work inspire dialogue, empathy, and renewed interest in rebuilding community spaces. It creates awareness, creates emotional connection towards peace.

Q: Are there risks or limitations in expressing certain ideas through art?

There is risk in expressing certain social concerns, especially if social or political realities can attract resistance or be misread. But the role of the artist actually is to reveal truth and to speak softly yet powerfully through form and content.

Q: What role do you think artists should play in shaping Nigeria's future?

Artists are truth bearers and bridge builders; they interpret the times and provide visions of what society should be and become. The role of art is to challenge, heal, and re-imagine Nigeria beyond division and pain.

North Central Nigeria

Joy Mbatomon Iorvihi, studied Fine Art at the Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo, specialising in painting. She works with the National Gallery of Art in the Curatorial Services Department, currently pursuing her postgraduate studies in Art History at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. In addition, she holds an M.Sc. in Conflict, Peace, and Strategic Studies from Nile University, Abuja.

Q: How would you describe the themes or messages in your work?

Joy's work explores the interplay of metaphors drawn from traditional folklore, music, fashion, dance, politics, and poetry. She often uses lines and African motifs to express her ideas, sometimes as references to traditional African history and culture and at other times as a form of pure creative experimentation. To me, art is constantly evolving; it is a dynamic process that grows with every experience. Each body of work determines its own materials, techniques, and form. While much of my practice engages with cultural narratives, I am equally drawn to issues concerning the environment. Some of my projects focus on themes of environmental preservation and climate change, as peace and sustainability are deeply interconnected. A safe and balanced environment is essential to a peaceful society. Meanwhile, the recurring themes in my work revolve around culture, identity, and social consciousness. I draw inspiration from African traditions, history, and everyday experiences to explore how our cultural values shape who we are today. Joy's art also reflects on social and political realities, engaging with ideas of peace, unity, and coexistence.

Q: What kinds of conflict or social challenges have affected your community?

In Benue State, where she came from, some of the major challenges faced include the long-standing farmer-herder conflict, which stems from struggles over land and resources. Over time, this has been worsened by issues such as banditry, terrorism, weak governance, and widespread poverty. These problems have led to recurring violence, displacements of communities, and a growing humanitarian crisis. They have also had a serious impact on agriculture, which is the backbone of our local economy. These challenges have disrupted livelihoods and created deeper social and economic instability in the state.

Q: How has your art responded to these issues?

Her art responds to these issues by creating spaces for reflection, dialogue, and healing. She uses visual storytelling to highlight the human side of conflict, which includes the loss, resilience, and hope that often go unseen. Through paintings, installations, and community-based projects, Joy

tries to spark conversations about peace, coexistence, and cultural understanding. She also draws from local traditions, symbols, and folklore to remind people of our shared roots and values, which can serve as common ground for reconciliation. In some of her works, she addresses environmental dimensions of conflicts, showing how struggles over land and resources are deeply tied to Nigeria's relationships with nature. Her goal, said Joy, is to use art as a bridge to raise awareness, inspire empathy, and encourage collective responsibility toward building a more peaceful and sustainable society.

Q: Can you share specific pieces or projects that were inspired by conflict or aimed at healing?

Joy states that several pieces from her 'African Tale' series were inspired by the realities of conflict and the need for healing within our communities. Three of them: *Eternal Roots*, *Sacred Flora*, and *Memory Pathways*, speak to these issues in different yet connected ways.

Eternal Roots reflects on the importance of identity and belonging in times of displacement and uncertainty. It portrays one's deep connection to ancestry and heritage, thus reminding viewers of the work that even in conflict, one's roots anchor us and give us strength. The work symbolises resilience, the ability of individuals and communities to stand firm in spite of turmoil.

Sacred Flora draws from nature as a metaphor for restoration and peace. It explores how the environment, often caught in the crossfire of human conflict, is also a source of healing and renewal. By using organic forms, motifs, and soft, layered tones, the piece speaks to rebirth and the possibility of harmony between humanity and nature.

Memory Pathways captures the process of remembrance and reconciliation. It reflects on how collective memory, both painful and redemptive, shapes people's path toward healing. The work suggests that by acknowledging the past and learning from it, communities can begin to rebuild trust and envision a peaceful future.



Figure3: Eternal Roots / Acrylic on Canvas / 20 x 30CM / 2025 Photographer F. P. Zaure

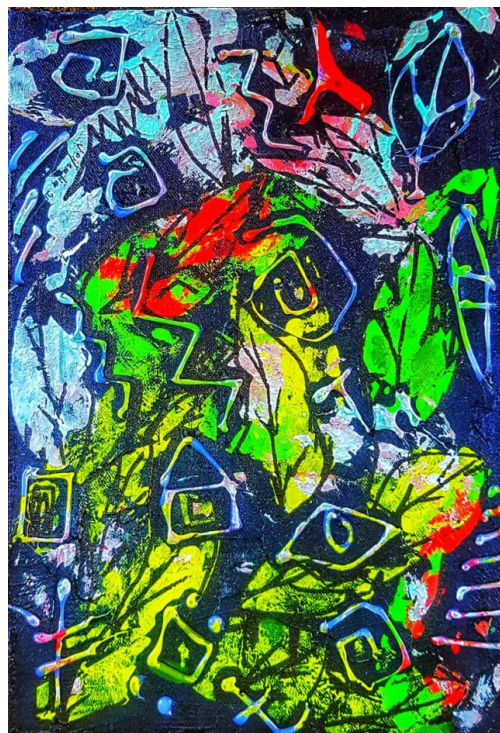


Figure 4: Sacred Flora / Mixed Media / 20 x 30CM / 2025 Photographer F. P. Zaure

These pieces convey my belief that healing begins when we reconnect with our roots, with nature, and with one another.



Figure 5: Memory Pathways / Mixed Media / 20 x 30CM / 2025 Photographer F. P. Zaure

Q: In what ways do you see your art contributing to peace-building?

Joy sees her art as a platform for reflection, dialogue, and connection, the three essential elements in peace-building. Through her work, she tries to create visual narratives that encourage people to look beyond divisions but see our shared humanity. By drawing from cultural symbols, folklore, and history, she reminds viewers of the values that once bound our communities, values such as respect, empathy, and collective responsibility.

Art, for her, is a quiet but powerful form of communication. It can speak across languages, beliefs, and backgrounds, helping people process pain and generate or imagine better possibilities. In exhibitions

and community projects, Joy uses art to open conversations about conflict, displacement, and reconciliation. These spaces allow people to share experiences and find common ground.

Peace begins with understanding, and art could nurture that understanding in ways words sometimes cannot. Through storytelling, symbolism, and shared participation, my work aims to inspire healing and foster a spirit of unity within and beyond my community.

Q: How do audiences, especially those affected by conflict, respond to your work?

Audiences, especially those who have experienced conflict, often connect with my work on a deeply emotional level. Many find it reflective of their own stories of loss, resilience, and hope. Some say the works help them see familiar experiences from a new perspective, while others describe a sense of comfort or healing in the colours, symbols, and themes I use.

During exhibitions and community engagements, she has noticed that people are often drawn to share their own memories or interpretations, which creates meaningful conversations around peace, identity, and coexistence. For me, those moments of connection are powerful; they show that art can reach people in ways that words sometimes cannot, while also offering a quiet space for understanding and emotional release.

Q: Have you seen any changes or impact resulting from your art?

Joy said she has seen some encouraging changes over time, that her art has sparked meaningful conversations within my community and among viewers who engage with my work. People often share how a particular piece made them reflect on their own experiences or see the importance of peace and cultural preservation in a new light. Through exhibitions, workshops, and collaborative projects, she has noticed that art can soften tensions and open dialogue among people from diverse backgrounds. It is not always an immediate transformation, but small shifts in perception, understanding, and empathy often appear. When someone begins to see hope, value their heritage, or feel inspired to take part in building peace, for me, those subtle changes are some of the most rewarding impacts of my practice.

Q: Are there risks or limitations in expressing certain ideas through art?

As an artist, Joy has learned that expressing certain ideas, especially those related to politics, conflict, or social injustice, can sometimes be sensitive. In our environment, where tensions and misunderstandings can easily arise, an artwork meant to inspire dialogue might be misinterpreted or seen as taking sides. There is also the challenge of self-censorship. At times, she finds herself weighing how much to reveal or how directly to address certain issues, because the goal is to

encourage reflection, not to provoke hostility. Another limitation is that not everyone is open to engaging deeply with art. Some people may overlook the message or dismiss it entirely, especially if it challenges their beliefs or experiences. Even with these risks, she still believes in the power of art to question, to heal, as well as speak truth in ways that words often cannot. It is about finding balance and using creativity thoughtfully to express what needs to be said while remaining sensitive to the realities of the community.

Q: What role do you think artists should play in shaping Nigeria's future?

The artist believes artists have vital roles in shaping Nigeria's future. They are not just creators of beauty but storytellers, observers, and truth-bearers who reflect the realities of our time. Through their work, we can challenge harmful narratives, preserve cultural heritage, and inspire people to think critically about the kind of society we want to build. Artists have the power to bridge divides, be it cultural, religious, or political, by creating spaces for dialogue and understanding. In a country as diverse as Nigeria, that role is crucial for artists. Art can also help us remember who we are, remind us of our shared humanity, and imagine a more inclusive and peaceful future. Beyond creativity, the artist believes artists must also be advocates, using their voices and platforms to highlight issues that matter, from environmental sustainability to social justice and good governance. In doing so, we contribute not only to Nigeria's cultural growth but also to its moral and social renewal.

Northwest Nigeria

Paul Victor Usman, born in Zaria, Nigeria, from Kaduna State. He received formal training at the prestigious Zaria Art School, Ahmadu Bello University, where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts, specialising in Sculpture. He later pursued Postgraduate Diplomas in Project and Facility Management and Human Resource Management, as well as professional certifications in Product Management and Sustainable Procurement Standards. He is presently enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts (MFA).

Q: How would you describe the themes or messages in your work?

Victor states that he explores the intersections of nature, humanity, and society, often reflecting on the emotional, environmental, and political dimensions of life in his work. He draws on themes such as environmental degradation, cultural identity, and social justice, amongst other themes, because they mirror the struggles and aspirations of the world he inhabits. Through his sculptures, he looks to portray the silent resilience of communities and the enduring capacity of the human spirit to adapt and survive.

Underlying his artistic expression is a philosophical commitment to dialogue using mediums for his themes. He views art as a medium that transcends boundaries, capable of turning pain into beauty and conflict into conversation.

Q: What kinds of conflict or social challenges have affected your community?

Victor states that the communities in Northern Nigeria have endured a series of social, economic, and political conflicts, from insurgency and ethnic clashes to poverty and environmental neglect. These tensions have led to displaced families and settlements, creating cycles of fear and uncertainty. As someone who has seen these realities firsthand, he is aware of the psychological scars they left behind.

Q: How has your art responded to these issues?

His art responds to conflict through symbolic reconstruction and transformation. By working with discarded, damaged, or decaying materials, he creates forms that speak of both destruction and renewal. In some sense, his practice mirrors the resilience of Northern communities that continue to rebuild amidst adversity. Each work becomes a silent protest against violence and environmental degradation, and an affirmation of hope and continuity.

In responding to these issues, Victor sees art as a bridge for dialogue, a language that can reach where words fail. His works often invite audience participation, allowing people to interact with the materials and meanings behind the work. Through this, he aims to foster reflection, empathy, and conversation across divides. Art, for him, is not an escape route from conflict, but a creative confrontation which sometimes magnifies the problems in order to project awareness and infer solutions.

Q: Can you share a specific piece or project that was inspired by conflict or aimed at healing?

One of his most memorable projects, “Gadan Zare,” in direct translation a Bridge of Threads, was born out of reflection on the environmental and human toll of conflict in northern Nigeria. The work is a combination of rusted roofing sheets and pigments to symbolise land desecration, communal loss, and eventual renewal. One of my most significant works inspired by conflict and reconciliation is titled *Gadan Zare*, a Hausa phrase meaning “Bridge of Threads.” The piece was conceived as both a metaphorical and material response to the fragmentation within northern Nigerian communities affected by violence, displacement, and mistrust. The title itself evokes the fragile yet enduring connections that hold humanity together, suggesting that even the thinnest

strands—like threads can weave new pathways of understanding and coexistence. The concept for *Gadan Zare* emerged from my reflections on how societies torn apart by conflict must rebuild their moral and emotional bridges, stitch by stitch, through dialogue, empathy, and shared resilience. Executed in mixed media, *Gadan Zare* employs rusted roofing sheets, red pigments, and a white frame to communicate the realities of destruction, pain, and eventual healing. The rusted sheets, collected from junk yard stands, represent conflict-ridden communities which symbolise the decay of social harmony and the corrosion of trust. The red pigments signify both blood and vitality the violence that scars, and the life force that endures. Framing these materials within a pristine white border was a deliberate act of contrast and containment, standing for purity, peace, and the hope of restoration. The composition draws the viewer into a visual dialogue between chaos and order, between ruin and rebirth.

Conceptually, *Gadan Zare* operates as a visual bridge between memory and renewal. It invites the audience to contemplate the possibility of rethreading broken relationships through forgiveness and collective healing. The presence of rust and colour evokes both discomfort and introspection, encouraging viewers to confront the consequences of human disconnection.

Ultimately, *Gadan Zare* reflects my enduring belief that art is a bridge of threads itself, delicate yet strong, vulnerable yet unbreakable. Through this work, the artist looked to transform materials of decay into metaphors of renewal, showing that what has been damaged can still be beautiful, meaningful, and whole. It stands as both a lamentation and a promise: a lament for the fractures of our shared humanity, and a promise that through creativity and compassion, we can weave our brokenness into unity once more.

Q: In what ways do you see your art contributing to peace-building?

Victor sees his art as a transformative dialogue that nurtures empathy, understanding, and reconciliation. Through sculpture and mixed media exploration, he tries to translate complex emotions into tangible forms that inspire contemplation rather than confrontation. By addressing themes such as loss and renewal, my works encourage audiences to reflect on shared humanity and to imagine possibilities beyond conflict.

Peace-building, for the artist, begins with awareness, then to recognition, the acknowledgment of pain and difference as the first step toward unity. When people meet my work and feel seen, heard, or represented, a seed of peace is planted. My art does not prescribe solutions but offers spaces for reflection where empathy can grow, and where dialogue can replace silence.

Q: How do audiences, especially those affected by conflict, respond to your work?

His audiences often respond to his work with deep emotion and reflection. Many people, especially those from conflict-affected areas, view his sculptures as a mirror of their own struggles and resilience. They describe feelings of recognition and catharsis, as if the works articulate what words cannot. He finds this emotional connection to be one of the most powerful indicators of art's social relevance.

In several exhibitions and community dialogues, viewers who engage with his work have engaged with his works beyond aesthetics; they interpret the works through personal narratives and memory. Such responses always reaffirm that art transcends boundaries of language, religion, and politics, into a shared language of healing and understanding.

Q: Have you seen any changes or impact resulting from your art?

He reports that he has seen meaningful changes, some subtle while others are profound. His work has inspired conversations about environmental restoration, cultural pride, and the need for social empathy. In workshops, participants often express a renewed sense of identity and purpose after engaging in the creative process of his works. These moments of transformation remind one that peace begins within the individual before extending to the community.

Moreover, Victor has seen a growing appreciation for art as a tool for social consciousness in Northern Nigeria. Young artists are indeed beginning to view their practice as a means of advocacy and education. Seeing that art sparks innovative ideas and initiatives for peace-building is among the most rewarding outcomes of his practice.

Q: Are there risks or limitations in expressing certain ideas through art?

Some of the limitations in a region marked by religious and political sensitivities are risky; expressing certain ideas can be risky to one's life and profession. Works that critique social systems, corruption, or ideological rigidity can provoke misunderstanding. The challenge lies in supporting artistic integrity while navigating such complex terrains of meaning.

Despite these risks, silence is even a greater danger than expression. So his take is to approach issues symbolically and metaphorically, creating works that stimulate thought without inciting tension. Art allows for layered communication, where critical messages can be delivered through beauty, metaphor, and empathy, yet enjoyed.

Q: What role do you think artists should play in shaping Nigeria's future?

Victor sees artists as visionaries and the conscience of society. So in shaping Nigeria's future, they must serve as storytellers, historians, and reformers, documenting the present while imagining alternative futures. Art has the power to humanise data, translate suffering into understanding, and inspire collective action.

Beyond creating beauty, artists however must engage with education, policy, and community-building to play their role well. They should also challenge systems of injustice, promote inclusivity, and cultivate empathy across divisions. If such is done the future of Nigeria, will be as vibrant and humane society as in the imagination of its artists .



Title: Gadan Zare, Medium: Mixed media, Size: 30cm by 20cm, Year: 2025



Title: Blood Rains, Medium: Mixed media, Size: 30 by 30cm, Year: 2025

Summary of findings

Across all three regions the common threads appear are that:

- i. Many artists view their work as therapeutic, helping communities' process grief and trauma.
- ii. Public installations and performances create spaces for conversation and reflection.
- iii. Artists challenge dominant narratives, expose injustice, and advocate for marginalised groups.
- iv. Creative workshops and exhibitions engage youth and promote civic values.

Conclusion

Fine Art offers a powerful, under-utilised tool for peace-building in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper affirms the role of fine art as cultural mediators and agents of change through the documentation of the voices and visions of artists in the Northeast, North Central, and Northwest Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. Government, Tetfund and NGOs should support art-based peace initiatives.
- ii. Peace-focused art programmes should be integrated into schools and community centres.
- iii. Create archives and platforms to encourage, preserve, and share conflict-related art ideas.
- iv. Partnerships between artists, peace-builders, and researchers should be encouraged.

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