



## **The Man, His Art and His Philosophy: Peace and Conflict Resolution Analysis of the Works of Jai Mariali**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Peace building and conflict resolution have become front burner issues in many societies. This is because, conflicts and crises are daily occurrences in the society, and the need to sue for peace cannot be over emphasized. Man's quest for peace dates back to prehistoric times and still ongoing. Peace building leads to meaningful development and a thriving atmosphere for creativity and mind development. This paper deals with the works of Jai Mariali, a contemporary artists in Nigeria, whose unique style, theme and philosophy evokes a sublime feeling and postulates peace issues in a society torn in crisis and other conflict situations. Literature on symbolism and allegories give impetus to the discussion and give a conceptual framework for the paper. The works were purposively sampled and analysed to understand the depth of the messages imbedded in them and the philosophies they stand for. The artistic process and creation is embedded in the rich philosophy and cultural heritage of the artist. The paper concludes by advancing the potency of visual art works in peace and conflict resolution in the society and how constant engagement with artists can open up new vistas of knowledge in peace building and make people understand the potency of symbols and allegories in artworks.

**Keywords:** Peacebuilding, artworks, conflict resolution, Philosophy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The place of visual arts in the society cannot be over emphasised. This is because, from the cradle to the grave, art affect various aspects of daily life. The creative process, the inventions and innovations, dealing with societal issues ranging from social, political and economic issues, art raises issues, which steer dialogue in the society. Dialogue, more often than not, help to propagate solutions to human problems or seeming ways of solving such problems or issues. Conflicts have plaque the human society over time, and the desire for peace and societal coexistence have made authors like Shank and Schirch (2008), and Barret (2005) to give models of peacebuilding in a conflict torn society. Barret (2005) for instance states that:

Art has an ability to communicate that words can never match. For many young people in particular, art and imagery can encourage imagination and enable even the least able school students to learn about peace. Symbols enable a person to represent a concept that can otherwise be too hard to put down on paper.

The communicative ability of art makes it a viable tool for postulating, promoting and propagating peace in the society. The imagination is better reinforced through graphic images, which art is at the fore front of establishing. Works of art in symbols and allegories have aided peace discussions over time. Examples

of works like *3<sup>rd</sup> May 1808*, by Francisco Goya, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) symbol by Gerald Holtom and the *Non-Violence Sculpture* by Carl Fredrik Reuterswård. All the works mentioned were reactions to various conflicts and wars in the societies involved, and how the artists variously responded to the issues of conflicts to draw attention to peaceful coexistence. The symbolisms imbued in the works, give allegorical nuances, all tailored toward peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

It can be argued in some quarters that, art cannot stop a war; however, a good understanding of the role of art can diffuse the air on this matter. William Kelly in Gold (2006) states that “it is my previously stated belief that although ‘a painting can never stop a bullet; a painting can stop a bullet from being fired’. This authored reechoed Picasso’s words in his reaction to the creation of *Guernica*, an art work (Tapestry replica) currently in the collection of the United Nations.

Today, several artists have created works that reflect peace issues. In Nigeria for instance, the works of Kolade Oshinowo, David West Haigh, Mu’azu Mohammed Sani, Jai Mariali and a host of others are worthy of note. This paper analyses the works of Jai Mariali, an artist based in Jos, Plateau State, with the hope of assessing the philosophy of the creation of the works on peace and conflict resolution.

### **Symbolism and Allegories of Peace**

The collection of various symbols that tell a particular story is referred to as allegory. According to *The Getty Centre* (2010:1), “A picture made up of symbols is often called an allegory”. The careful placements of symbols in artworks, tell stories around the symbols, some of international appeal like the dove, butterfly, olive branch, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) sign, white poppy, rainbow flag and other didactic symbols created by artists to represent peace. These symbols which have rich historical antecedents have been used across the globe to discuss issues of peace and conflict resolution. Onoja (2017:1) in discussing issues of peace and conflict resolutions, symbols, allegories and icons, paraphrases that:

An allegorical story of peace in *Picture of Peace* (n.d.) on the viability of using art to communicate peace in society is hereby advanced: An artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought by the artist, he painted a beautiful country scene with all the trappings of peace. The wealthy man was disappointed with the painting and asked the artist to try again. After several attempts of painting other genres relating to peace and having several disapprovals from his patron, the artist finally got an inspiration to create a new painting. In the painting, he put in a lot of thought and related icons to peace. The picture showed a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. The artist had captured the fury of the wind, as it whipped off black rain clouds which were laced with streaks of lightening. The sea was roaring in turmoil, waves churning, the dark sky filled with the power of the furious thunderstorm. The focal interest was that, in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, the artist had painted a small bird, safe and dry in her nest, snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird was at peace, amidst the storm that raged about her.

### **The Artist**

Jai Mariali Abba was born on the 20th February, 1946. He attended St. Murumba School of Arts from 1961 to 1965. Thereafter, he started a career in banking. While in the bank; He registered with Washington School of Arts to improve his artistic skills. He left banking after 12 years and went to Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, Nigeria, where he spent nine years with the masters, learning and working with them. Later on, he came to Jos to establish a studio/gallery practice. He has participated in several individual and group shows, displaying his unique style of paintings and relief wood chip sculptures. He is a member of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), a professional body of artists. Jai is a full time studio artist, which gives him room to experiment on various media to pass across his philosophies embedded in his art forms.



**Plate I: Jai Mariali. Image was taken during a field visit to the studio in Jos Museum on June 18, 2015**

In an interview with the artist on peace issues, in response to the question, *what is your outlook to peace?* he responds that, It is very simple but very complex. We are all made up of men and women. We, the people are made up of men and women. When we are polite to each other, there are no disputes among us. Being polite means profiled respect for ourselves. We don't need the conflict. We need to agree and disagree, but violence is not the answer. Dialogue...with dialogue comes respect, because you listen to the other man, hear his views, why he is doing what he is doing, the way he is doing it, you know. Then he will listen to you. Then you agree on how you could come together and work together, this lead to respect and goodwill (Jai Mariali Abba 2015).

### **The Works**

The works discussed in this paper are works created by Jai Maraili in response to peace issues in Jos, Plateau State. It is important to note that, Jos has suffered several violent conflicts from 2001 on ethnic, religious and political fault lines. Several authors and experts have advocated various means of reducing the escalation of violence and suing for peace. Artists also, being integral members of the society, have given their voices through their creations to concertedly deal with issues on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Onoja and Duniya (2016) for instance, state that, "The potency of the artists' exhibits and statements gives credence to the peace process, hence, the need to advance same in the art historical parlance". The authors further analyse *Circle of Life* ( Plate II) by Jai Mariali as follows:



**Plate II: Circle of Life, Jai Mariali, 76 cm diameter, Wood Chip Carving and Painting on Board, 2014. A Collection of the artist.**

The repetitive symbol in *Circle of Life* evokes the feeling of peace and reconciliation, which in Africa, forms a circle. Conflict and reconciliation, life and death, war and peace among several other aphorisms. The exhibit states unequivocally the tensions and harmonies of life. Peace and conflict is a circle, and with the proper understanding of the phases of the circle, mediation and reconciliation are possible for peace building efforts.

The symbols in the work are collections of African folklore symbols and signs, which pass across potent messages to the viewer with the aim of raising dialogue and advocating for peace. Mariali (2016) in an interview avers that “I did a lot of research on our cultural heritage, local craftsmen, going back to historical times. You see what symbols represent, it is like they are just letters and words, and they are. In fact, a symbol can represent a whole book, depending on how it is used”. This master artist has used symbols to say volumes, which have not been documented outside the exhibitions where the works have been displayed.

The Blast (Plate III) displays the effects of conflicts in the society, the bomb blasts which led to loss of lives and properties in the various conflicts.



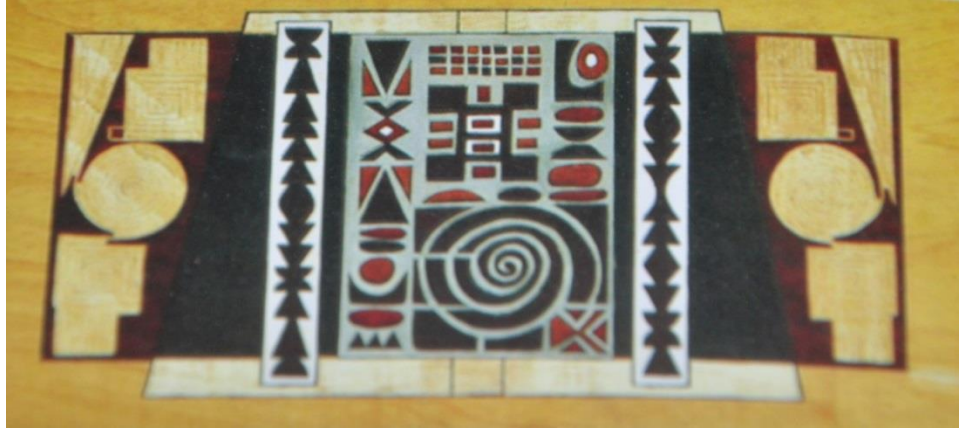
**Plate III: The Blast, Jai Mariali, Coloured Pencil on Board, 2014. A Collection of the artist.**

The artist however created the work to raise issues centred on peace from a conflict situation. Mariali (2016) explains that:

I call this one *The Blast*. *The Blast* is like a topsy-turvy of the whole situation. But if you look at it, there is still unison in it, because it takes two to really tango. So in a violent situation, there is still good coming out of it, and the good is the unison, the understanding of each other, of the self and the other man actually.

Seeing the best of every situation is an optimist view which this artist has used to discuss peace issues. The aesthetics created from the blast shows unison of design elements and principles, which is the driving philosophy of the artist.

In another work titled *Peaceful Dialogue* (Plate IV), Mariali used various African motifs and symbols to dialogue on peace. He believes in using symbols as text to tell his story.



**Plate IV: Peaceful Dialogue, Jai Mariali, Wood Chip Carving and Painting on Board, 2014. A Private Collection.**

The artist avers that, “visual art is beautiful in itself. It cuts across cultures, it cuts across beliefs, and it cuts across traditions. It is like coming together, it is like bringing together, there is no religious import in visual art or cultural or traditional import in visual art, no. It speaks to each individual personally”. The conglomerates of motifs coming together in a simplified design format, which is creative objectification used by Mariali, steers interest in the viewer to ask questions, which invariably leads to dialogue, of which, peace is central.

### **Peace Advocacy**

The artist has worked on various fora and exhibitions to promote peaceful coexistence in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria and beyond. The Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), Plateau State Chapter of which Jai Mariali is an active member, have staged exhibitions on peacebuilding in Jos and other parts of the country. Some include *Celebrating Peace*, which held between 1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> November, 2013, at the National Museum, Lagos - Nigeria. In discussing the aforementioned SNA exhibition, Larab (2013) reports that, “The creation of these images are lucid and clear reflections of their concerns in relation to the challenges and task of finding solutions to same”. This brief statement underscores the theme of this exhibition – it is a celebration of peace, an export of peace to their milieu; The environment and conflict circumstances the artist found himself, has made him collaborate with other artists with nuances on peace to create works imbued with allegories and philosophies of peace. Larab (2013) further opines that:

it is clear depiction of the conflict that engulfed the once peaceful haven called the ‘ Home of peace and tourism’ but beyond that, the exemplification of peacebuilding and the healing process worth celebrating through no other media, but the wonderful collection of art on display by different individual artists from SNA Plateau State Chapter.

Jai Mariali has carried his peace advocacy to several places beyond the shores of Nigeria, as his works are in private collections across the globe. The works are appealing to people of different cultures, and thought provoking, especially the esoteric nuances on peace.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper which is an analysis of works on peace issues by Jai Mariali, x – rays the potency of visual arts in discussing peace issues and the role of an artist in creating works with allegories and philosophies of peace. It is important to note that, works not discussed will probably not come to public purview, especially for people who do not attend art exhibitions and other art shows. The artist suggests the use of the mass media to disseminate information on peacebuilding, and artists should be at the forefront of creating works that tell the stories of yesterday’s devastations and conflicts in order to create a dialoging

society today, which will in turn bring about peaceful coexistence in the future. Art historical discourse has helped to propagate various issues, which the author feels is a way of passing the message of peace and conflict resolution.



**Plate V: Jai Mariali in his studio and the author Jacob Onoja during an interview session.**

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