

RELIGIOUS ART AS A PANACEA FOR THE WARRI CRISIS IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Warri crises, variously manifesting as inter-ethnic, resource, land, and political conflicts among the Itsekiri, Urhobo, and Ijaw in Delta State, have endured for decades, with periodic eruptions of violence impacting socio-economic life, displacing populations, and undermining trust among communities. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and state interventions have achieved limited success. This paper argues that religious arts which integrate visual art, music, drama, dance, ritual, iconography, and performance within religious settings offer a promising, under-used panacea for peacebuilding in Warri. A mixed-methods design combining phenomenological components, with participatory action research (PAR) involving stakeholders (religious leaders, artists, youth, community elders, festivals organizers) are adopted for this research. The findings show that religious arts can foster identity healing, dialogue, moral education, interethnic understanding, and resist politicized violence. The paper concludes that religious art can serve as a key component to peace building and as a panacea for the Warri Crisis debacle. The paper avers policy recommendations for government, religious institutions, artists, community leaders, and cultural organizations as a way forward.

Keywords: Religious Arts; Warri Crisis; Panacea; Delta State; Nigeria

Introduction

Warri, in Delta State, Nigeria, is a city and a region marked by its oil resources, ethnic diversity (primarily Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw), migration, wealth disparities, political marginalization

perceptions, and contested land and resource claims (Adenle & Oyeoku, 2014). Over decades, these tensions have erupted into the Warri crisis, which is a collection of inter-ethnic and intra-communal conflicts that have led to loss of life, property destruction, mutual suspicion, arms accumulation, militancy, youth restiveness, and underdevelopment of the non-oil sectors.

Eru (2024) opines that standard conflict mitigation strategies—police/security interventions, compensation, commission reports, and political negotiation—have had partial success but often address symptoms rather than the deeper, affective, symbolic, identity, moral, and relational dimensions of the crisis. What is often missing is an approach that works on soft structures: meaning, memory, identity, moral repair, reconciliation, trust, and community cohesion. This paper aims to examine whether and how religious arts can serve as a panacea for the Warri crisis. Central research questions include:

- i. What are the components of religious arts and how are they practiced in Warri / Delta State?
- ii. In what ways can religious arts address the causes and manifestations of the Warri crisis?
- iii. What theoretical frameworks support the use of religious arts in conflict resolution and peacebuilding?
- iv. What practical strategies and programs can be implemented to integrate religious arts into peacebuilding in Warri?

This research is important because it proposes a solution to the Warri Crisis by integrating arts-based peacebuilding with religious studies and conflict resolution, specifically in the Warri context. It offers new pathways for policymakers, religious bodies, cultural stakeholders, and artists to engage beyond conventional political or economic frameworks.

Brief History of Warri.

The city of Warri is an oil hub within South-South Nigeria and houses an annex of the Delta State Government House. Warri City is one of the major hubs of the petroleum industry in Nigeria. Warri, Udu, Okpe and Uvwie are the commercial capital of Delta State with a population of over 311,970 people in 2006 (Ilo, 2015; Igbaro 2010). The city is the indigenous territory of Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw people. Warri shares boundaries with Uvwie to the east, Udu to the south east, Ogbé-ijoh to the south, and other communities in Warri South LGA to the west (Paulinus, 2018). Due to its rapid population growth and linked roads, the city and its border towns, for instance, Uvwie, Udu merged into a conurbation collectively referred as "Warri".

Warri sits on the bank of Warri River which joined Forcados River and Escravos River through Jones Creek in the lower Niger Delta Region. The city has a modern seaport, which serves as the cargo transit point between the Niger River and the Atlantic Ocean for import and export, however, the Port have not be fully functional for some years now. It is worth mentioning that

Warri served as the capital of the colonial Warri Province during the early 1900s when this part of Delta State was under the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (Omogiate, 2024).

Warri Crisis: Causes, Manifestations, and Existing Responses

The Warri crises have multiple underlying causes, which include but not limited to land ownership disputes, perceived marginalization by the federal/state government; environmental degradation; unequal distribution of oil revenues; youth unemployment; ethnic identity struggles; and lack of development in non-oil sectors. Manifestations include violent clashes between ethnic groups, pipeline vandalism, illicit bunkering, inter-communal mistrust, arms accumulation, and breakdown of social cohesion.

Warri (Warri South, Warri Southwest, and Warri North) has a history of land ownership disputes involving the itsekiri, Urhobo, and Ijaw communities. According to Azuakor (2024), over 25 court cases have addressed land matters in Warri, with six specifically concerning the city's overall ownership, with each of the three major ethnic groups claiming ownership of the land, or some portions of the Land. The following are some of the claims and cases:

Urhobo Claims

The Agbassa Urhobo community has pursued several legal claims to assert ownership over the entire Warri, primarily against the Itsekiri, represented by the Olu of Warri or Itsekiri Communal Land Trustees. Key cases include:

Ogegede v. Dore Numa (1925): The Agbassa Urhobo claimed rents for portions of land leased to the government by itsekiri's. The Supreme Court of Nigeria dismissed the claim, finding no evidence to support Urhobo ownership (Ossaiga, 2024).

Ometan v. Chief Dore Numa (1926): The Agbassa Urhobo sought a declaration of title over Warri lands. The court ruled that the Itsekiri, under the Olu, held overlordship, with Agbassa recognized as customary tenants.

Agbassa Appeals (1931, 1933): Appeals to the Full Court (1931) and Privy Council (1933) upheld the 1926 ruling, affirming Itsekiri overlordship over Agbassa lands

Other Agbassa Cases (1941–1973): Cases including W/44/1941, W/3/1949, W/121/57, W/41/57, SC.67/1971, and SC.327/1972 consistently recognized the Itsekiri's radical title and possessory rights over Agbassa lands, with Agbassa people as customary tenants

Idudun v. Okumagba (SC/309/74): The Okumagba family (Urhobo) secured possessory rights to 281.1 acres along Okumagba Avenue based on traditional evidence and acts of ownership. As the defendants did not counterclaim for title, the radical title remained with the Olu of Warri

Ijaw Claims

The Ijaw communities, particularly in Ogbe-Ijoh and Gbaramatu, have contested land ownership in Warri, often against the Itsekiri:

Chief Apoh v. Perememighan (1928) & Chief Apoh and Chief Okotie v. Pere (1938): The court affirmed Itsekiri occupancy rights over disputed lands and rivers, allowing Ijaws to use them with permission from the Itsekiri, recognizing the Olu of Warri's overlordship (Ortuh & Omosor, 2023)

Suit W/116/56 (1956): Justice Obaseki granted the Itsekiri possessory title to Aruteghan Creek and surrounding lands, with the Olu of Warri holding radical title, affirming Ijaws as customary tenants

Suit W/148/56 (1956): Chief Isuokumo Oloiki and others, representing Ijaw settlers in Ogbe-Ijoh, claimed ownership of large portions of Warri Division. After prolonged litigation, the Ijaws withdrew their claim, and Justice Rhodes Vivour barred them from future claims against the Itsekiri Communal Land Trustees.

Appeal of Chief Isuokumo Oloiki (1967): The Ijaws appealed the 1956 ruling (Suit W/148/56) to the Supreme Court (SC/450/65). Acting Chief Justice Sir Lionel Brett dismissed the appeal on April 24, 1967, permanently barring Ijaws of Ogbe-Ijoh from claiming ownership of Ogbe-Ijoh or other Warri Division lands

Gbaramatu Cases (1946, 1962, 1973): In cases like W/20/46 and SC.37/1973, courts ruled that Ijaws in Gbaramatu were customary tenants under the Itsekiri, with the Olu of Warri holding radical title .

Supreme Court rulings have consistently affirmed the Itsekiri's radical and possessory titles over most Warri lands, with the Olu of Warri or Itsekiri Communal Land Trustees recognized as overlords. The Okumagba (urhobo) family holds possessory rights over 281.1 acres along Okumagba Avenue, while the Agbassa Urhobo, Gbaramatu Ijaw, and Ogbe-Ijoh Ijaw communities are customary tenants under the Itsekiri, with the Olu of Warri retaining radical title. Despite these rulings on the ownership of Warri lands, some Urhobo and Ijaw groups continued to assert ownership claims over Warri (Ortuh & Omosor, 2023)

Existing responses: Governmental interventions, sometimes commissions, conflict mediation via traditional leaders, inter-ethnic dialogue, youth empowerment programs. Yet these have often been reactive, localized, or unsustainable. There is little literature on aesthetic or symbolic interventions in the Warri crisis specifically.

The Concept of Religious Arts

Religious art is an art related to or influenced by religion. Religious art has been produced in many cultures and religions throughout history (Ossai, 2021). It can take the form of visual arts, including paintings, sculptures, architecture and even video games; or performing arts, such as music and theatre (Nwaomah, 2024). According to Efiog (2023) Religious arts refers to

religiously situated artistic expression: sacred music, liturgical drama, dance, iconography, visual arts, ritual performance, religious festivals, and so on., that are embedded in and shaped by religious belief, symbolism, community practices. Religious art refers to artistic expressions, spanning visual and performing arts, created with religious or spiritual intentions to depict sacred figures, narratives, and concepts from various religious traditions. Its purposes include inspiring devotion, educating believers about religious teachings, commemorating important religious events, creating sacred spaces for worship, and fostering a sense of community and identity around a faith (Chiwetalu, 2024)

Forms of Religious Art

Religious Arts comes in various forms, these includes the following:

Visual Arts:

Paintings, sculptures, architecture, illuminated manuscripts, mosaics, stained glass, and icons.

Performing Arts:

Music, theatre, and other forms of performance.

Objects:

Prayer mats, ornaments, and ceremonial objects used in religious practices.

Purposes and Functions of Religious Arts

Religious Arts are purpose oriented and they play various functions depending on the context. Below are some purposes and functions of Religious Arts

Devotion and Worship:

To inspire believers and facilitate connection with their faith.

Education and Storytelling:

To convey religious teachings, sacred narratives, and historical events to followers.

Sacred Spaces:

To create an environment conducive to spiritual experience, contemplation, and worship.

Community and Identity:

Religious Arts foster a shared identity and strengthen the bonds within a religious community.

Personal Connection:

Religious arts provide a medium for personal expression and to enhance the worship experience for individuals.

Examples Across Faiths

Christianity:

Images and stories from the Bible, such as scenes from Christ's life and the lives of saints.

Islam:

Calligraphy, geometric patterns, and ornamentation found in mosques, on prayer mats, and other objects.

Judaism:

Mosaics in synagogues, which often focus on religious themes while avoiding anthropomorphic **depictions.**

Hinduism:

Diverse artistic traditions linked to Hindu deities, scriptures, rituals, and architecture.

Buddhism:

Depictions of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, mandalas, and other objects used in Buddhist practices.

Theoretical Bases of Religious Arts

There are various theories by Scholars on how Religious Arts can be used. For instance, Obiefina & Okeke (2023) advocates Symbolic Interactionism (how symbols shape identity and social relations), Paulinus (2018) suggests Performance Theory (drama, ritual as enactment), Ottuh & Omosor (2023) stressed on Peacebuilding Theory (relational repair, moral imagination). There are also Cultural Trauma Theory (healing through narrative, art), Social Identity Theory that is overcoming in-group/out-group bias through shared symbolic forms (Udeani, 2024; Aliyu & Sarki, 2019) . However, this paper draws primarily upon three interlocking frameworks:

1. Cultural Trauma and Healing: communities exposed to recurrent violence undergo identity wounds; religious arts allow storytelling, ritual, symbol to process trauma, promote collective memory, forgiveness.
2. Performance of Identity & Social Identity Theory: Art (especially in religious settings) helps assert, negotiate, bridge identity boundaries among ethnic / religious groups. Shared religious performance can shift group perceptions.
3. Peacebuilding and Moral Imagination: Following scholars like John Paul Lederach, James Fonseca, religious arts help cultivate moral imagination—that is, envisioning alternative futures, empathy, transformation beyond zero-sum contestation. Also, the concept of Interreligious

Collaboration (between different religious bodies) enhances legitimacy, shared symbolic power, and trust.

Empirical Analysis of Religious Arts in Peacebuilding in Nigeria and Elsewhere

Music and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: Potentials in the Art Music Genre (Eru & Abakporo, 2024) analyses how art music (composed / performed within churches, religious settings) can promote peaceful electoral behavior and mitigate religious/ethnic tension.

Africa Sensed Music Education and Conflict Resolution: According to Effiong (2023) the Case of Jos, Plateau State shows indigenous music aiding social cohesion, reducing tribal and religious bigotry. The Church and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria highlights the role of church institutions in moral education, preaching peace, and mediating conflicts. Facilitatory Roles of Art Therapy on Victims of Ethno-Religious Crises (Adenle & Oyeoku, 2014) examines how art media (drawing, painting, visual expressions) assist trauma healing in victims of religious riots, particularly children or orphans. Religious Iconography (Ottuh, Omosor, Abamwa, 2023) discusses how religious symbols contribute to moral values and social ethics in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Art as a Catalyst of Religious Development in Nigeria (Igbano, 2010) traces the historical relationship of art and religion, including how art was suppressed by some religious movements, yet remains vital to religious expression and communal values (Obiefuna, & Okeke, 2023).

It is worth noting however, that most studies are national or other-region focused (for instance Jos, Plateau State) rather than Warri. Few studies combine several religious art modalities (visual, performance, festival, iconography) within one integrated peacebuilding intervention. Limited empirical/longitudinal data on the efficacy of religious arts in relation to reducing violence, trust repair, youth engagement in Warri has not been adequately explored, and there is a dearth of materials in this regard. This paper is a bridge to that lacuna.

Religious Arts as a Panacea for the Warri Crisis.

Although systematic studies are limited, existing practices already illustrate potentials which can be explored and improved on. Some of which are:

Music Academy, Catholic Diocese of Warri: An institution established to promote liturgical music, formation in religious music practice. Such training builds capacity and deepens musical quality and spiritual appreciation. This kind of gathering can foster peace and unity in the oil rich region.

Warri Arts Festival International (WAFI): A festival with music, art, dance, drama, fashion, visual arts, craft display, which aims to bring diverse communities together under themes like “Stronger Together” and expresses cultural identity, creativity, and civic pride. This will not only discover new talents, it will help channel the attention of the populace to something productive.

Art Exhibitions/Iconography Efforts: For instance, Olù of Warri inaugurating a mangrove exhibition to raise environmental awareness uses art as advocacy and symbolic instrument.

These examples, though not always explicitly targeted at conflict resolution, represent latent potential that can be explored to foster peace and unity, and can be used as a panacea for the Warri Crisis.

.How Religious Arts Can Address the Warri Crisis

As it has been noted, Religious Arts can be used as a solution to the Crisis in Warri. Below are ways religious arts can function as a panacea:

Table 1.1: How Religious Arts can be used as a Panacea for the Warri Crisis

Problem/Manifestation of Crisis	Religious Arts Intervention	Expected Impact
Identity/ethnic exclusion, suspicion among Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw	Collaborative sacred music, joint religious festivals, combining multiple ethnic/religious groups; interfaith worship with artistic elements (drama, songs, dance)	Increased mutual understanding, reduced "othering," shared sense of community
Trauma, fear, psychological scars from past conflict	Art therapy (drawing, painting, drama) within religious institutions; ritual memorial services with artistic components	Healing, closure, reducing psychological barriers to dialogue
Youth restiveness, unemployment, disaffection	Training youth in religious arts (choirs, drama workshops, visual arts), integrating them into performances/festivals; opportunities for creative expression in religious settings	Empowerment, diversion of youth from violence, pride, social cohesion
Moral breakdown; lack of accountability	Religious dramas, sermons using visual art/iconography to represent justice, forgiveness, reconciliation; teaching morality via performances	Ethical renewal, increased moral self-reflection, strengthening social norms
Environmental/resource conflicts (e.g. oil, land)	Religious art exhibitions to highlight environmental stewardship (e.g. mangroves), visual narratives in churches/mosques on land rights, nature	Awareness, valuing common ground, environmental ethics as value to all groups

	as sacred	
Communication breakdown, lack of dialogue	Art-based forums: theatre, storytelling, spoken word in religious contexts where different groups share narratives; joint iconographic projects; inter-religious art workshops	Enhanced empathy, mutual listening, shared language of symbolism

Challenges and Limitations

Although it’s a laudable idea to use Religious Arts as a solution to the Warri Crisis, the idea also have some challenges and limitations. The following are some of the challenges:

- i. Religious arts interventions may be seen as symbolic only; may lack immediate material improvements (jobs, infrastructure).
- ii. Religiously conservative voices may resist certain arts, for instance, drama, dance, iconography, especially if seen as non-orthodox approach.
- iii. Funding, sustainability, institutional capacity are constraints
- iv. Danger of arts becoming co-opted politically; or reinforcing divisions if art is not sensitive.
- v. Measuring impact is difficult: attitudinal changes, trust, relational impacts are harder to quantify.

Conclusion

Religious arts, when properly understood and deployed, hold significant promise as a panacea for the Warri crisis. They do not replace political, economic, legal, and security interventions, but complement them by addressing the symbolic, relational, moral, identity, narrative dimensions of conflict. Through music, drama, iconography, festivals, art therapy, communal performance, they can foster healing, shared identity, moral renewal, youth empowerment, and inter-ethnic/ inter-faith dialogue. For lasting peace, stakeholders must commit to integrating religious arts into peacebuilding frameworks, ensure sustained funding, institutional support, and inclusive participation. The Warri case can become a model for other ethnically divided and resource-rich regions in Nigeria and beyond.

Recommendations for Implementation

Below are strategies and policy-level recommendations, targeted to different stakeholders:

1. For Religious Institutions

- i. Establish interfaith arts committees in Warri: involving Christian (various denominations), Muslim, Traditional religion leaders and artists to design joint art programs. Integrate art therapy into pastoral care, especially for victims of crisis, displaced persons, traumatized youth.
- ii. Use religious festivals to project peace motifs, invite neighbouring ethnic communities; embed peace songs, collaborative dances.
- iii. Encourage religious iconography and visual art (murals, banners, sacred symbols) that promote unity, reconciliation, and shared heritage.

2. For Cultural / Arts Organizations

- i. Alongside festivals like WAFI, include specific workshops or performances aimed at conflict resolution: theater that dramatizes Warri's history, poetry workshops, spoken word competitions on peace, youth art exhibitions on reconciliation.
- ii. Support capacity building for artists from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to work together; provide grants.

3. For Government / Policy Makers

- i. Recognise religious arts as part of peacebuilding in policy; allocate budget for religious art interventions as preventive peace infrastructure.
- ii. Support arts education in schools with curricula that include religious arts, local music, religious festivals, iconography, dance. Partner with religious / cultural bodies to mediate funding, infrastructure (spaces, studios) for religious art.

4. For Researchers and NGOs

- i. Conduct empirical longitudinal studies to evaluate impact: pre- and post- intervention attitude surveys, trust indices, tracking of violence incidents.
- ii. Document indigenous artistic religious practices in Warri (traditional dances, festivals, sacred rituals) that may have fallen into neglect but have potential.
- iii. Promote inclusive participation: women, youth, non-elite artists, marginalized ethnic groups.

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