



The Role of Arts and Culture in Peacebuilding in Ethiopia

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This publication is the product of Selam Ethiopia's effort, with independent contribution by Tilahun Bejital Zellelew (PhD), Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies, Center for Social & Cultural Studies, Academy of Ethiopian Languages & Cultures, Addis Ababa University . The coordination duties for this project were expertly handled by Alehegn Moges Tessema.

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FOREWORD

The study sought to examine the challenges, opportunities and best practices of the arts and culture sector as regards its role in peacebuilding in Ethiopia. Data was generated from key informants from Addis Ababa as well as from seven regional cities, namely Semera, Gambella, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Adama, Jijjiga and Dire Dawa. Qualitative data was generated through 17 individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) while a review of relevant documents was also made. Drawing on insights of artists, cultural experts, peace actors and institutions, the study identified findings that not only characterize the sector's status in terms of its role in peacebuilding in Ethiopia today but also suggest intervention areas toward transforming the sector to be truly an agent of peace in the country, if not beyond. By discussing the art/culture-peace nexus, the study expounded the distinctive roles the arts and culture sector can play before the outbreak of conflicts, during conflict and war, as well as in post-conflict contexts because how artists behave and what purpose their artworks serve significantly varies in these different settings. The study has also been underpinned by the understanding of the double-edged nature of art. That is, as much as one speaks of peaceful art, one may also be tempted to think of a bellicose art, which fans the flames of conflict by adding fire to the fuel in contested and precarious socio-political contexts. In both its positive or negative potentials, one only notes the might of art as a double-edged sword with which either one can do harm or reverse harm, can kill or save, can inflict pain or heal, etc.

The empirical study reveals that the sector has opportunities, potentials, good practices as well as challenges in terms of its relevance for peacebuilding in Ethiopia. Opportunity wise, there are artists who use their artworks to promote peace while peace agents or institutions such as the FDRE Ministry of Peace, at least in principle as stipulated in their official documents, believe in leveraging art for peacebuilding. Moreover, the study found that some individual artists, their professional associations, and cultural institutions are using "art for humanity, peace and nation building", "art and culture for regional integration", "art for intercultural dialogue", to mention but a few. The trend of peace/unity/virtuous theme in music albums, the availability, though limited, of artistic platforms that serve as a locus of creativity, diversity and sense of unity, on the one hand, and as a space of showcasing the rich and diverse socio-cultural capital of the country at large, on the other, are also worth mentioning.

As far challenges are concerned, the sector is facing an apparent disregard and undervaluation of its power while the overall culture of war dressed up in nationalism and patriotism appears to grip the sector to be more responsive to war calls and campaigns than to peacebuilding initiatives. When some initiatives for peace emerge, they are more often than not aborted due partly to the ethnicization and political instrumentalization of arts and culture. Furthermore, loose inter-institutional connection and lack of inter-sectoral synergy and the subsequent fragmented and unnecessarily duplicated efforts, weak intra-sectoral peace and harmony in the arts and culture community, uneven artistic and cultural opportunities in areas outside Addis Ababa and away from capitals of regional states appear to have hampered the sector's contribution to peacebuilding efforts in the country.

To be more precise, the study has identified the following findings: Art and culture nourishing the culture of war; art and culture overwhelmed by ethnic politics; artists trading off artistic freedom for economic gains; uneven distribution of artistic activities; art and culture not visible in healing and reconciliation in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Last but not least, the study has come up as much with questions as it has with answers: Are we asking too much of the sector? How can the sector of art and culture perform for peace, stability and serenity while the artist and their works are themselves products of the absence of these virtues? Even if artists are not islands in a society, how can they escape nourishing the culture of war in a society that arguably glorifies war and heroism? Where there is little or no serious regard for and investment in the art and culture sector, can we expect too much to reap the benefits of arts and culture?

Finally, to enable the sector to be of relevance to peacebuilding, the study recommends that the sector should maintain a nuanced engagement with patriotism, war and politics while it is very important to bridge the sectors of peace and art such that artists should promote peace and peace agents should leverage art. Moreover, exercising the culture of dialogue in the arts and culture sector toward intra-sectoral peace and harmony; practicing pedagogy of art as pedagogy of peace for dovetailing art education and peace education; and doing research on the diverse potentials of art and culture across the country and assessing and supporting grassroots level artistic initiatives could make a difference in leveraging the power of art and culture in peacebuilding efforts of both the peace as well as the culture sectors in Ethiopia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study sought to examine the challenges, opportunities and best practices of the arts and culture sector as regards its role in peacebuilding in Ethiopia. Data was generated from key informants from Addis Ababa as well as from seven regional cities, namely Semera, Gambella, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Adama, Jigjiga and Dire Dawa. Qualitative data was generated through 17 individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) while a review of relevant documents was also made. Drawing on insights of artists, cultural experts, peace actors and institutions, the study identified findings that not only characterize the sector's status in terms of its role in peacebuilding in Ethiopia today but also suggest intervention areas toward transforming the sector to be truly an agent of peace in the country, if not beyond. By discussing the art/culture-peace nexus, the study expounded the distinctive roles the arts and culture sector can play before the outbreak of conflicts, during conflict and war, as well as in post-conflict contexts because how artists behave and what purpose their artworks serve significantly varies in these different settings. The study has also been underpinned by the understanding of the double-edged nature of art. That is, as much as one speaks of peaceful art, one may also be tempted to think of a bellicose art, which fans the flames of conflict by adding fire to the fuel in contested and precarious socio-political contexts. In both its positive or negative potentials, one only notes the might of art as a double-edged sword with which either one can do harm or reverse harm, can kill or save, can inflict pain or heal, etc.

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As far challenges are concerned, the sector is facing an apparent disregard and undervaluation of its power while the overall culture of war dressed up in nationalism and patriotism appears to grip the sector to be more responsive to war calls and campaigns than to peacebuilding initiatives. When some initiatives for peace emerge, they are more often than not aborted due partly to the ethnicization and political instrumentalization of arts and culture. Furthermore, loose inter-institutional connection and lack of inter-sectoral synergy and the subsequent fragmented and unnecessarily duplicated efforts, weak intra-sectoral peace and harmony in the arts and culture community, uneven artistic and cultural opportunities in areas outside Addis Ababa and away from capitals of regional states appear to have hampered the sector's contribution to peacebuilding efforts in the country.

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Finally, to enable the sector to be of relevance to peacebuilding, the study recommends that the sector should maintain a nuanced engagement with patriotism, war and politics while it is very important to bridge the sectors of peace and art such that artists should promote peace and peace agents should leverage art. Moreover, exercising the culture of dialogue in the arts and culture sector toward intra-sectoral peace and harmony; practicing pedagogy of art as pedagogy of peace for dovetailing art education and peace education; and doing research on the diverse potentials of art and culture across the country and assessing and supporting grassroots level artistic initiatives could make a difference in leveraging the power of art and culture in peacebuilding efforts of both the peace as well as the culture sectors in Ethiopia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Ethiopia is currently facing formidable socio-political hurdles that essentially require interventions in the short-, mid- and long-term bases. Such challenges as intergroup tensions, hate speech, displacement, unemployment, disenfranchised and disenfranchised youth, opportunistic and predatory elites, to mention but a few, are menacing Ethiopia. Notwithstanding the lack of sustainable and dependable peace and the apparently increasing degradation of intergroup tolerance and mutual respect, Ethiopian societies have continued to defy pessimistic forecasts that

“It would be art’s task to perform both the diagnosis and to provide the treatment [...]”

*Viet Thanh Nguyen
(2009, p. 149)*

likened their country’s fate to that of former Yugoslavia. However, thanks largely to the robust socio-cultural capital, the country appears to be holding up against all odds. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any nation in the world that has come to where it is now on a free ride. Even the relatively peaceful and prosperous countries today passed on bumpy roads in their historical journeys. In this regard, what Richard Rorty noted of the US is worthy of a quote: “[...] America has never been a morally pure country. There has been a history of extreme violence and the projection of democratic ideals. But if one focuses exclusively on the intense shame of past (and current) horrors then there is no possibility of encouraging ordinary citizens to work for reform [...]” (Rorty 1998, p. 3-4 in Bernstein 2019). Thus, beyond denouncing evil and abominable acts, it is necessary, on the one hand, to assess the root causes of such acts and to devise alternative and creative ways of empowering and encouraging citizens to collectively build a peaceful nation. Accordingly, the examination of the potentials of art and culture in peacebuilding in general and in the cultivation of citizenship, human rights, democracy, civility, dignity, mutual respect, among others should be areas that require serious and coordinated multi-sectoral interventions in Ethiopia.

Art and culture are cornerstones of a nation state, which is as much a result of imagination and creativity as it is of a defined territory, sovereignty, people and government. At the heart of the foundation of any nation are imaginative stories or mythologies that go down from one generation to another. Whether imagined or real, stories that transcend across generations not only bind the present with the past but also carve out common destiny as a unified nation for which art and culture serve to creatively transmit the commonly shared (hi)stories, symbols and heroes, past glories

and traumas of a nation. Serious art positively upsets status quo by, for example, questioning some taken-for-granted assumptions whereas responsible art is instrumental in safeguarding the national interests and unity of a country. Art also serves as a trailblazer and a beaconing light for society because the imaginative and creative prowess of artists gives them the edge to think ‘out of the box’ and the poetic license to dare ask what maybe an uncomfortable question for many. Art and culture have immense potential in peacebuilding, social cohesion, conflict resolution and reconciliation (Naidu-Silverman 2015; Gold 2006; Lederech 2005; Zelizer 2003). When misunderstandings lead to conflict and conflict turns into deadly violence, art can pave the way for reconciliation and healing through its power of sparking sympathy, pity, and forgiveness. As Naidu-Silverman (2015, p. 11) rightly comments, “One of the most important roles of art in post-conflict societies is its ability to restore victims’ capacities to participate in reconciliation processes, access their emotions and begin their individual healing processes” Art can also galvanize society for post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation by invoking sense of unity and solidarity and revive broken friendships and social cohesion.

However, one should not romanticize and speak only of the rosy side of art. Art, which is not risk free (Lederech 2005), can equally contribute to the culture of war (Zelizer 2003; Adams 2008; al-Jeddawy, al-Kholidy and Nevens 2021), for example, by instigating inter-group grudges, misunderstandings and violence. As Naidu-Silverman (2015) aptly notes, “Art and cultural activities have as much potential to build peace and facilitate processes of reconciliation as they do to fuel cultures of violence and conflict.” Indeed, whereas responsible artists unleash their creative potentials toward positively influencing society and the world at large, others may make use of the artistic medium as a breeding ground for hatred, conflict and violence because art has the potential to reify memories and alleged past atrocities to the extent of engendering animosity and revenge here and now. As Nguyen (2009, p. 149) rightly notes, “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.” The re-enacting power of art in bringing up memories, on the one hand, and in creating images of alleged animosities and atrocities, on the other, can be exploited by some either inadvertently or maliciously. Therefore, as much as one speaks of peaceful art, one may also be tempted to think of a bellicose art, which fans the flames of conflict by adding fire to the fuel in contested and precarious socio-political contexts. In both its positive or negative potentials, we only note one important point - the might of the art as a double-edged sword with which either one can do harm or reverse harm, can kill or save, can inflict pain or heal, etc.

To understand the role that art and culture have played in solving political conundrums, in paving the way for peaceful and civil discourse and in serving as instrument of peace and peacebuilding initiatives in Ethiopia, it would be instructive to very briefly look at the political context of the country. In Ethiopia, over the last five or so decades, there has been an on-going debate on historical narratives, ethno-cultural identities, national symbols and heroes while the Ethiopian statehood itself is subsequently a subject of controversy. On the other hand, since EPRDF (a party that ruled the country for nearly three decades) was toppled down by popular protest and the current administration led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took the helm in 2018, Ethiopia is on a political rollercoaster. Among the grand changes in the last four years is the remarkably peaceful solution to the over-two-decade standoff between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which earned PM Abiy a Nobel Peace Prize. Domestically, the release of political prisoners and the return of exiled politicians that ushered in an open political space, reconciliation between the diaspora synod and the synod at home of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the relative opening up of the economy for foreign capital flow, to mention but a few, have raised huge optimism among Ethiopians and those who closely follow Ethiopian affairs. These same four years, however, have seen arguably the most deadly and violent conflicts, inter-communal clashes and displacements in the country's recent history. Moreover, the outbreak of an all-out war between the Tigray Regional State and the Federal Government since November 2020 which has caused several deaths, mass displacement and starvation is another deplorable condition that marred the peace and stability of the country. It is a no brainer that conflicts of such magnitude deeply affect any society, never mind a society that is divided in ethno-cultural lines and has already been struggling to come to terms with its own history and sense of nationhood. Of course, what has been unfolding in Ethiopia in recent years and the subsequent lack of peace and stability would require a multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach be it to propose solution to or understand the very problem. However, in light of finding imaginative and creative approaches to peace building (Bräuchler 2015; Gold 2006; Lederech 2005) research on the role of art and culture in peacebuilding in Ethiopia is conspicuously absent except very few studies (Khurana & Saraceno 2019; Gezaey 2015) and news reports on the subject. It is amidst such political context of the country and in the current scarce state of research on the topic that the current study on exploring the role of art and culture in peacebuilding is conceived and embarked upon.

1.2. Objectives

The study aimed to explore the role that art and culture play in peacebuilding initiatives in Ethiopia. As such it particularly sought to:

- Assess the role of Culture/Art in peacebuilding in Ethiopia
- Identify the opportunities for art/culture to play its role and the barriers that hinder the sector not to play its role in peacebuilding.
- Document lessons and design concept note for a program/project to identify and leverage opportunities toward addressing the deficits in the sector of arts and culture in Ethiopia

1.3. Art, Culture, Peace: Conceptual clarity

The collocation of art, culture and peace need some degree of clarification from the outset as there is no consensus to date as to the definition of each of them, never mind to the coming together of the three terms. For instance, both art and culture are two of the most elusive concepts with plenty of varied definitions across generations of scholars. The word culture alone had 78 definitions as early as in 1950s (Kendall and Wickham 2001, p.2), not to mention the perennial controversy over the definition of art among philosophers and art historians. It would thus be quite unviable in the scope of this study to venture into a review of these definitions other than offering a brief explanation of how the two concepts are meant to refer to in the context of the current study. In this study by art and culture it is meant to refer to all the creative and aesthetic cultural capital which individuals or societies (re)produce and use. It is to mean the various genres of visual art (painting, graffiti, illustration, photography, filmmaking, etc.); literary arts (poetry, novels, short stories, etc.); performance arts (dance, theatre, music, etc.) (al-Jeddawy, al-Kholidy and Nevens 2021, p.6); oratures (oral literature and traditional arts forms such as qererto, shilela) and other creative cultural repertoires used in building peace.

As if the complexity of the above two terms is not enough, we have in this study another cumbersome concept in peace. The notion of peace itself has different understanding although there appears to be a growing awareness that peace is not the absence of conflict, which is unavoidable as long as people live together. As Dorothy Thompson (cited in Ogato 2016, p. 96) notes, "Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict – alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence." This remark helps us contemplate well the creative potential of culture and the instrumentality of art in peacebuilding. While there are several peacebuilding approaches, the creative approach to peacebuilding would benefit a lot from art that is inherently 'creative'. In this regard al-Jeddawy, al-Kholidy and Nevens (2021, p. 9) underscore, "If peacebuilding is understood to be fundamentally about social change, and the transformation of relationships in order to achieve this change, then there are many ways in which the creative arts emerge as effective and strategic tools and mechanisms to contribute to these changes."

The essence of the current study, i.e., role exploration, calls for the instrumentalist theory of art. In contrast to the theory of art for art's sake, which sees the inherent values of art independent of its functions, the instrumentality theory of art views art in terms of the purpose it serves to society: "Through the lens of instrumentalism, the best artworks are those that convey a message or shape how we see the world. Unlike other art theories, instrumentalism says that art is good when it functions as a tool to influence or change society."¹ Moreover, the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's notion of *littérature engagée* (literally engaged literature or literature of commitment) which refers to artists' serious responsibility to their audience or society more than to their craft² adds another theoretical foundation to the current study. While Sartre's usage of the word 'literature' may sound a little too specific, the definition and the very notion captures well how the serious service art and artists render to society. Since art and artists also serve as voices of marginalized societies by showing alternative ways toward socio-cultural and political emancipation and better future (Naidu-Silverman 2015), other relevant theoretical perspectives in the realm of critical theory will also be employed depending on the data that will be generated. In short instrumentalism theory and related conceptual frames will serve as a theoretical backdrop toward exploring the role of art and culture in peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

1.4. Methods

The study is a qualitative one that employs multiple instrumental case studies which illuminated the topic under study. Accordingly, data was generated from key informants from Addis Ababa as well as from seven regional cities, namely Semera, Gambella, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Adama, Jigjiga and Dire Dawa. These cities were purposively selected due to their relatively better artistic and cultural activities (art/poetry clubs, cultural music bands, cultural centers, etc.). Qualitative data was generated through 18 individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) between May 11 and August 18, 2022. In addition, a review of relevant documents was also made. Particularly, the art community dialogue jointly organized in January 2021 by the Ministry of Peace and Selam Ethiopia wherein the current researcher was a convener of the dialogue in his role as Cultural and Social Affairs Advisor at the Ministry of Peace, was found to be a relevant document that highlights the major challenges and prospects of the sector as a potential peace actor in Ethiopia. The participants of the study were individual artists, groups and institutions that were regarded as key stakeholders by virtue of their profession and service either in the peacebuilding or arts sector. Accordingly, artists, producers, culture experts, arts professional associations, artistic platform (such as Tobbya Poetic Jazz), art and cultural centers, and institutions mandated to build peace were reached out to share their insights, experiences and practices. The overall data were presented in the study report either in holistically grasped statements or verbatim quotes as deemed appropriate.

2. THE ART-PEACE NEXUS

2.1. Arts and culture in peacebuilding

"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

Constitution of UNESCO (1945)

For peace studies scholars (Carter and Guerra 2022; Chappell 2013; Zelizer 2003; Lederach 2005) the relationship between peace and art goes beyond viewing the latter as instrument to achieve the former. While Zelizer (2003, p. 68) acknowledges the "significant degree of overlap between the work of artists and peacebuilding", Lederach (2005, p. 34) precisely notes, "The artistic process has this dialectic nature: It arises from human experience and then shapes, gives expression and meaning to that experience. Peacebuilding has this same artistic quality. It must experience, envision, and give birth to the web of relationships." Carter and Guerra (2022, p. 2) on their part remark "Artists value creativity as much as peacemakers and peacebuilders do, regardless of their goal differences." While such views and conceptualizations nourish well our understanding of the art-peace nexus, the investigation of the connection between art and peacebuilding in this study, however, targets art's potential as a creative tool in resolving conflict, in boosting social cohesion and ultimately in achieving sustainable peace.

On the other hand, the arts can tell whether a given society has a culture of peace or culture of war. While the use of the arts, for example, as "glorification of military conquest" (Adams 2006) nourishes the culture of war, their service to the promotion of harmony, love and tolerance shows the arts serve the culture of peace to which, for instance, "performative arts and intangible cultural practices play an important role." (Wulf 2022, p. 13). There are ample evidences around the world where the arts are used to legitimize war, and thus consciously or unconsciously nourish the culture of war, on the one hand, or avoid "political issues altogether" on the other (Adams 2006, 173). The latter behaviour of the arts or artists can even be more dangerous, for behaving neutral and remaining passive in the face of devastating wars and conflicts is tantamount to nourishing the culture of war and to eventually letting evil triumph over good. It thus seems to be clear from the foregoing discussion that art and the artist cannot afford to remain outside of conflict and war since to remain silent when their voices matter is as important as their active involvement be it for positive or negative cause.

1 What Makes Art Good? A Lesson and Explanation of Art Theories, December 8, 2019. Accessed on 23 April 2022 from <https://artclasscurator.com/art-theories/>

2 <https://www.britannica.com/art/litterature-engagee>

3. Arts and culture at different stages of conflict

It is important to make distinction in the role the arts and culture can play before the outbreak of conflicts, during conflict and war, as well as in post-conflict contexts because how artists behave and what purpose their artworks serve significantly varies in these different settings. For example, Adams (2006, p. 172) notes, "when countries are not at war, in recent centuries, the arts have remained more independent of the state and often they are neutral or convey messages against war and the culture of war." During war, however, the arts are used as essential instruments to justify the war (Ibid). From another perspective, the role of arts and culture should not be viewed only in terms of their remedial service to the consequences of war and conflicts during active conflict or post-conflict times. The arts do also have a huge role to play before the outbreak of war or conflict. For instance, they can "help raise awareness of the dangers of impending conflict and speak out in favour of peace" (Zelizer 2003, p. 65). This shows that the arts can be part of the early-warning system. It is worth mentioning here that scholars in Germany have recently come up with what can be called "literary early-warning system". In a project they called the "Project Cassandra", named after the prophet of disaster in Greek mythology, the scholars attempted to dovetail literature and intelligence. Funded by the German Ministry of Defence (Bundeswehr) in 2017, the Project aimed at using literature as predictor of war and civil strife. As Professor Wertheimer, the lead researcher of the project, says, "I would not hesitate even to include *Der Stürmer* (the Nazi's rabidly anti-Semitic weekly that routinely featured pictures of Jewish men with long hooked noses); these ideologically problematic texts are important and valuable because they give us information about what's going on." (Greenfield 2021). This is a proof for the potential art not just as a remedy for fixing what has been broken but rather as relevant system that signals a given society's state of peace and security. Literature, by virtue of its character as a reflection of life, mirrors not only the writer's state of mind but also the overall context in which a given literary work is produced and circulated. As such using literature as an early-warning system enables one to examine artistic works, among others, how they are informed by societal tensions and whether or not they are used to exacerbate the tensions (Greenfield 2021). By doing so, one can use art to predict as much about the future as about the present and the past.

On the other hand, the role of the arts in post-conflict times is of immense significance. In addition to or along with the post-conflict recovery and reconstruction efforts, the use of arts and culture as part of the healing and recovery process has been proven very crucial. As Zelizer (2003, p. 72) writes, "[...] in post-conflict reconstruction efforts that more creative artistic processes need to be included. Through support of such activities this can assist individuals and groups in healing from the horrors of war and serve as a bridge to facilitating increased intergroup-interaction and healing." The post-conflict period is marked by reconstruction of infra-structures ravaged by violent conflict. The reconstruction process involves fixing broken social relations that essentially brings about the process of reconciliation toward building a more durable peace. Writing of the importance of reconciliation as a foundation for a culture of peace, Bar-Tal (2009, p. 374) notes, "New norms, values, opinions, symbols, narratives, ceremonies and cultural products have to emerge." These are elements and repertoires of the arts and culture sector that are not readily offered by professionals whose focus is largely on the physical recovery and reconstruction.

Cultural practices do also play their own role in transforming post-conflict societies. While wars and conflicts affect socio-cultural lives of societies, cultures use their own remedies to fix what has been broken by devastating wars and conflicts. External supports and humanitarian aids indeed make a difference in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. However, true redemption and transformative change come from within where cultural practices play a great deal of role in the process of peace and reconciliation. As Michael Wessells (2009, p. 359) note,

Cultural practices enable communities to construct meaningful narratives, whether expressed in songs, dances, stories, or dramas, about their circumstances and the value of peace. Following armed conflict, the rekindling of cultural practices such as cleansing rituals or the use of traditional songs helps to communalize pain and build continuity between a painful past, the difficult present, and the future. Through cultural practices, people express their collective identity and their hopes as well as their pain.

While the resumption of a peaceful everyday life is a gradual process, some cultural practices that were suspended due to war or conflict could also have the potential to give communities a sense of assurance over the return to normal life. However, a mere celebration of certain cultural holidays alone may not exploit the full potential of cultural practices toward peace and reconciliation unless they are (re)appropriated accordingly. In this regard, Wessells (2009, p. 359) writes, "By orienting the practices toward peacebuilding, the practices become avenues for restructuring collective identities and narratives in ways that promote unity, harmony, and peace." In this way, what were routinely celebrated and practices rituals or ceremonies would in post-conflict contexts serve as ideal platforms for peace and reconciliation.



It is also worth reiterating that while the arts and culture have “the salutary effects” (Blumberg 2006, p. 46), they have the potential to be revived at times of active conflict. In addition to the potentials of recurring cycles of war and violence as a source of the culture of war, “war strengthens institutions such as armies and ministries of defense, heightens military,” (Wessells 2009, p. 349). However, there are also ample evidences around the world of the existence of artistic creations that were inspired by war and conflict. Conversely, conflicts and post-conflict situations do also necessitate the revival and reinvention artistic works including traditional art forms (Naidu-Silverman 2015, p. 7), which yet again reaffirms another unique relationship between arts and conflict and/or peace alike. This may not be surprising given the fact that “Traditions are not only constantly changing, but are also creatively revived and (re)invented at certain times.” (Bräuchler 2015, p. 26). In view of this, one can appraise the conflict and post-conflict situation of Ethiopia in terms of the artistic ambience as to whether it is oriented toward peace and reconciliation or toward glorifying triumph be it during or post-conflict times. Accordingly, the use of such traditional forms as kererto, shilela, gerersa, and other traditional forms of art should be evaluated in this light.

4. ART FOR PEACEBUILDING: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND BEST PRACTICES IN ETHIOPIA

In this section the empirical data generated from the art and culture community on the one hand and from the peace agents and actors, on the other, are thematically presented highlighting challenges and best practices the art and culture sector have as regards peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

4.1. Opportunities

Although the large part of data obtained from informants appear to have inclined to magnify the challenges the sector faces in the country and the subsequent frustrations artists and cultural actors feel incapable of discharging their responsibilities to make a difference, an attempt was consciously made to unravel the relative opportunities the country in general and the sectors of art and peace already have. As such the following are highlights of the opportunities as observed by the researcher and perceived by the research informants.

4.1.1. Artists promoting peace, peace agents leveraging art?

From Bob Marley who reconciled warring groups in Jamaica to Bono, who played a significant role in the Friday Agreement 1998 between David Trimble and John Hume (leaders of the unionist and nationalist movement respectively in Northern Ireland) (McLaughlin and Baker 2010), artists have played a role or two in the process of building peace and reconciliation around the world. In this regard, the following individuals and institutions have notable practises and experiences in Ethiopia worth sharing here.

The goal of bridging art and peacebuilding is not that we endeavor to become something we are not.

(Lederach 2005, p. 161)

The Ministry of Peace: Art for national unity and consensus

The Ministry of Peace (MoP), one of the institutions studied in the current research, is regarded by many as the institutional embodiment of the political transition and the institutional reforms put in place following the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed back in April 2018. It is worth looking at MoP’s responsibilities and duties. MoP was formed with a vision of ensuring a sustainable and holistic peace in Ethiopia, according to the first proclamation (Proclamation No.1097/2018) as well as the recent proclamation (1263/2021) in the new cabinet formation. Among the multifaceted powers and responsibilities, the following are outstanding ones that are worthy of a lengthy quote below:

- coordinate the relevant organs to bring about consensus on critical national issues; submit recommendations to the government and follow up their implementation upon approval;

- work in cooperation with relevant government organs, cultural and religious organizations, and other pertinent bodies to ensure peace and mutual respect among followers of different religions and beliefs, as well as nations, nationalities and peoples;
- in cooperation with the relevant actors, work towards the creation of national consensus on critical national issues; propose recommendations to the government, and upon approval, follow up their implementation;
- develop awareness creation and sensitization strategies to foster a culture of respect and tolerance among individuals and groups, and follow up their implementation;

The new proclamation (1263/2021, article 1f) particularly states that MoP has the powers and duties to “promote, in collaboration with concerned organs, the enhancement of cultural exchange, civic education, and artistic works that build national unity and consensus” (emphasis added). This clearly shows the institution’s mandated responsibility to engage in the development of the fields of arts and culture toward national unity and national consensus. In light of this, the researcher of the current study, in his former position as Cultural and Social Affairs Advisor to the Minister at MoP, had the privilege to witness firsthand the attempts the Ministry made to engage the arts community in peacebuilding and dialogue efforts since February 2021.

The readiness to integrate art and culture in peacebuilding policies and annual plans of activities is proof enough there has been a notable understanding and appetite, so to say, to use arts and culture in peacebuilding by the Ministry. However, given the strong will and belief in the sector to make a difference in peacebuilding works, not so much has actually been done to create a strong link between the two sectors. My informant at MoP has also corroborated this as follows:

“No question over the importance of art for peacebuilding but not so much has been done to be honest given the potential of the sector. Our draft policy also clearly states this. Many artists come to us with various proposals though many of them require huge budget to implement. Peace work requires one’s heart and mind for which art is the best gateway.” (Interview 17.08.2022)

What our informant said appears to go with Lederach’s (2005, p. 161) remark when he says, “What would it mean if peacebuilders saw themselves as artists? It would be an error if we thought only those who are artistically gifted in a particular discipline could pull this off.” This is to mean that workers at the Ministry of Peace or any peace actor for that matter, should not be artist by profession. It is rather to mean the importance of adding a creative and imaginative prowess one needs in peacebuilding and above all the necessity of dovetailing the two fields or worlds toward building a better and peaceful world. As Lederach (2005, p. 161) himself underscores, “I am not appealing for nor advocating that peacebuilders must be artists in the professional sense of the word in order to connect art and social change. The key is simpler than that: We must find a way to touch the sense of art that lies within us all.” One way of doing that could thus be creating a bridge between the two fields. While the consideration and acknowledgement of arts and culture as instrument of peacebuilding by the Ministry is very encouraging, an actual and more rigorous engagement with the sector would be a profitable avenue given the huge potential of the sector in the country. In order to achieve this, forging an institutional collaboration, i.e., between the Ministry of Peace and the Ministry of Culture and Sports would help harmonize apparently fragmented efforts so that the two sectors would create synergy toward a creative practice of peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Visual Artists Association: Art for humanity, peace and nation building

One of the art-related associations in the country, the Ethiopian Visual Artists Association of Ethiopia has been making efforts to use art as an instrument for social change in Ethiopia. The association, in collaboration with various institutions, organizes events for such virtuous causes as peacebuilding, charity, as well as advocacy works. As the posters of the events show and interview with the Association’s president affirmed, the Association, despite considerable challenges, is attempting to leverage art’s capacity to be a positive social force in the country.

As is evident in the posters of exhibitions below, most, if not all, of such events often take place in Addis Ababa, a city that is relatively peaceful compared to regional cities. While the efforts of the Association, despite meagre resources and limited capacities, is encouraging, it is a bit of a paradox to promote peace in a relatively peaceful city while the most conflict-affected areas in the regions are conspicuously absent in the map of such initiatives in the country.

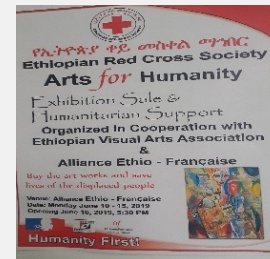
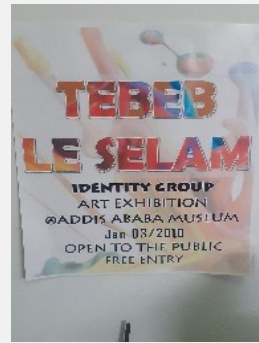
Table 1: Various initiatives attempted by Ethiopian Visual Artists’ Association

Below are a few initiatives the Association undertook in recent times that should be replicated and done as regularly as possible:

Tibeb Le Selam (Arts for Peace): This was an open-for-all exhibition with free entrance organized by the Association to advocate for and promote peace. Many artists were willing to showcase their works that inspire peace, solidarity, unity. etc.

Arts for Humanity: Organized in collaboration with Ethio-Francaise (Addis Ababa), this exhibition, as its very title suggests, had a noble cause, i.e., Arts for Humanity. Artistic works were sold toward a “humanitarian support” for the displaced. It should be noted that the exhibition was a timely response because the year (2019) was a very rough time for millions of internally displaced Ethiopians due to violent attacks and communal conflicts. As such the money collected from the sale of paintings went to the Ethiopian Red Cross Society toward helping the IDPs

Arts for Peace and Nation Building: An exhibition the Association organized in January 2019 in collaboration with the Ministry of Peace, it aimed to bring together young and veteran artists to showcase their paintings at the Millenium Hall, Addis Ababa, and promote the place of art in nation building and peacebuilding.



The trend of peace/unity/virtuous theme in a music album

There has been a long trend of adding peace or related themes of social virtues in the Ethiopian music. Ato Dawit Yifru, President of the Ethiopian Musicians' Association and a veteran artist himself who left his own legacy on what is often hailed as the golden age of Ethiopian Music in the 1960s and 70s, has this to say on the role of music for peacebuilding:

In the last forty and fifty years, many artists sang about peace. Some works already got already in the collective memory of people. One good example is Mohamud Ahmed's "Selam" which serves as the anthem of peace in Ethiopia today.

Such a tradition in the Ethiopian music indeed appears to be one way of inculcating the virtues of peace in citizens. Mahmud Ahmed's song indeed appears to be today an iconic song on peace that declares peace not just to Ethiopia or Ethiopians but to human beings around the globe and every creature on earth. Telahun Gessese, regarded by many as the father of modern Ethiopian music, is also known for his wide-ranging and impactful socio-cultural and political themes of his music while especially his tearful and passionate rendition of his own musical works of intense patriotism and themes of love for country are his trademarks that have captured the imaginations of generations in Ethiopia. Although the word 'peace' may not be necessarily explicitly mentioned, there are several songs of love for one's country (patriotism), fraternity, unity, solidarity, cooperation, etc. not just in Amharic language but also in other Ethiopian languages, too. Such a trend should be encouraged so that the music industry can contribute to peacebuilding. However, in addition to producing music albums with themes of peace,

organizing cultural festivals and music concerts in all parts of the country can make a difference. It must be noted that music concerts in Ethiopia are held more often than not in the capital or in a very few selected regional capitals, denying the artistic and cultural rights of communities living in away from urban areas and capital cities.

Tobiya Poetic Jazz

Established ten years ago by five like-minded partners, Tobiya Poetic Jazz is one of the very few active cultural and artistic platforms in the Capital Addis Ababa. According to one of its co-founders, Misrak, Tobiya was established to create a platform for different artists who write, paint, perform about Ethiopia, especially using local genres. The various artistic and entertaining programs are meant to boost co-existence, sense of patriotism and common history, national unity, harmony, etc., all of which, according to Misrak, would contribute to peacebuilding and nation building. Held once in a month in a rented hotel hall, the event attracts hundreds of attendees, some of whom are annual entrance ticket holders, which itself is setting a new trend in the arts and cultural activities of the capital. The attendees of the poetic nights come from various walks of life and from different generations while the performers are young poets, amateurs as well as veteran artists. Misrak's remark on the rationale behind establishing and regularly running this platform and the crucial role it plays in nurturing the generation as a responsible citizen is worthy of a lengthy quote:

A citizen who knows his/her history, values and culture will not be an easy prey for conflict and crisis. If we do not invest on the youth letting them to know their history, value, and cultures, we would not expect responsible citizens now. We are demanding the existence of responsible citizens without investing and nurturing on their path and on their life journey. Art is instrumental in this due to its compelling and aesthetic power. (Interview 19.07.2022)

Such an initiative, if they are more inclusive in term of accommodating the rich and diverse cultural repertoires as well as opinions and perspectives of artists, can indeed become an effective platform for using artistic moments toward the promotion of tolerance, dialogue, peace and unity.

Arts and Culture for Regional Integration

While the current study was underway, Addis Ababa hosted a supranational initiative, organized by the FDRE Ministry of Culture and Sports, that intended to bring together Eastern and Horn of African countries to showcase their cultural and artistic capitals. Thus, the diverse ethnic music and material cultures of the country were displayed while artists and cultural actors also had a chance to meet with a handful of cultural delegates from neighbouring countries. Although the vision of the event was so noble and grand, the turnout from neighbouring countries was apparently not up to what the event had promised to be. This could perhaps be due to the negative publicity the country incurred due to the war between the Tigray Regional State and the Federal Government. Despite such limitations, however, the intent of the event is not only commendable but it should also be replicated in the future.

Table 2: Regional Arts and Culture Festival held in Addis Ababa



Such platforms have immense relevance in terms of paving the way for Ethiopians, or citizens of other states in the region, to reimagine their sense of identity beyond their specific ethnic, regional and national boundaries. Promoting the organization of more of such platforms, on one hand, enables inter-state relations of the region, and above all, helps transcend beyond and surmount the narrow nationalistic political tendencies that appear to put at stake the national unity and harmonious co-existence of Ethiopians with different ethno-linguistic identities.

Applied Theatre for Peaceful Coexistence between HC and IDP

The current study also identified a promising and exemplary project that employed traditional or ritual performance that afforded a converging creative space for HC (Host Community) and IDP (Internally Displaced People) in Somali Regional State of Ethiopia. Developed and run by Mahlet Solomon Theatre Production (MSTP) in collaboration with USAID/IOM, the project relied on the power of ritual performances as a gateway to renewed intercultural dialogue and social cohesion between host and displaced communities focusing particularly on women. According to the owner of the project, Mahlet Solomon, this project intended to “identify traditional and ritual ceremonies and merge them with compatible applied theatre forms that can improve oppressed women’s life and the interaction of both HC and IDP community that is influential to start dialogue to maintaining peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution.” (Personal communication). This project, beyond proving the power of traditional creative forms in maintaining social cohesion between host and displaced communities, particularly sets a great example of the possibility of exercising applied theatre for peaceful co-existence and intercultural dialogue in Ethiopia.



Ellilta Products: From Bullet-Butt to Jewellery

Ellilta Products is a company that transforms a war accessory, i.e., a bullet-butt into art in the shape of a jewellery. Since its establishment about eight years ago, Ellilta has been producing scarves and jewelry for export, mainly to the North American market. Interestingly, all the profit it makes reportedly goes to support Ellilta Women at Risk and provide rehabilitation services for women trapped in the sex trade as well as to their children with an eye toward “breaking the generational cycle of prostitution,” says Eyob Tamiru, General Manager of the Ellilta Products. What is even more relevant to the discussion of art and peace/war is Ellilta’s creative intent to transform a war accessory, precisely a bullet-butt into an artwork in the form of necklaces, earrings, etc. By doing so, the project reproduces and recycles an object that acutely symbolizes war, killing or death and transforms it into artwork which in effect is charged with these symbolic meanings beyond its materiality. If examined more closely, each jewellery made from the bullet-butt embodies stories and intense emotions of a potential life lost as result of war or conflict and the subsequent firing of the bullet. This attempt to transform a war object into a work of art is somehow reminiscent of Carl Fredrik Rueterswård’s sculpture work called the Knotted Gun, which symbolizes non-violence and is now found in front of the UN Secretariat Building in New York.

4. 1.2. Challenges

Below are participants’ reflections on the challenges that hamper arts and culture from playing their positive roles in peacebuilding. The challenges range from misunderstanding to prevalent culture of war to political instrumentalization of arts.

1. 1.1. Apparent disregard for arts and undervaluation of its power?

The conceptualization of arts and culture as strong social, cultural, political, or economic force is well-documented and researched. However, not everyone has similar understanding of the values and power the sector. In this regard, interviews held with the artists, peace actors, cultural experts and government officials who participated in the current study also reaffirm either a prevailing misconception or undervaluation of the sector’s capacity. One informant made a nuanced remark in that the misconception as well as lack of belief in the sector’s capacity is both in the art community as well as on the part of the government.:

The use of artistic works in our country is often for ‘decoration’ purpose alongside some events. የኪነጥበብ ሚናው በአብዛኛው ከማድመጫነት የዘለለ አይመስልም። The government needs art when it has big national events such as elections or when it faces war. Besides, there is also an apparent lack of belief in one’s own capacity among the artist community as well. (Interview with Art and Cultural Expert, 12.08.2022)

The above statement of our informant is one of the most repeated factors that almost all informants shared as regards the challenges the sector faces not to play the role it should for social change in the country. There appears to be also some kind of misconception, which in turn results in disregard for the sector, by some who tend to regard art just as a source of sheer entertainment. However, as far as the periodic use of art for special purposes such as by government bodies is concerned, one can argue that it may not be problematic as such. In fact, this itself, though episodic, proves that the government somehow believes in the power of the arts. That is whether the arts are used at time of war or other political events, it is because they have the power to influence people. As such government or politicians may not be blamed for lack of ‘undervaluation of the power art’. The problem rather appears to be in the misappropriation of the arts for political purpose, on the one hand, and the apparent lack of interest in the sector during ‘normal times’, the details of which are discussed at fair length in an upcoming section. The foregoing discussion suggests that in addition to using the arts at time of crisis or “big national events”, it is necessary to use as well as nurture the sector at relatively ‘normal’ times if the best is to come out of this sector.

Because through such artistic programs we can mobilize the society good thoughts and can measure the perception and feelings of the society. In ancient period there was a trend called “eregnaw min ale” to hear the actual feeling of the society through herders. Thus, in the contemporary, governments shall actively listen, watch, and understand the art works which reflect the actual life of the society and feelings of the society for their state. (Interview with Misrak, Tobiya Poetic Jazz Co-founder)

1. 1.2. Culture of war dressed up as nationalism and patriotism?

<p>ጠብና ጥበብ "ተዋጋ ብሎ ቢሰጠው ጋሻ ለናቱ ሰጣት የእበት ማፈሻ" (አገርኛ ቀረርቶ) የጥበብ ሁሉ መጀመሪያ ጠብን መፍራት ጦርን መግራት ከጋሻ የእበት ማፈሻ መሥራት። በዕውቀቱ ሥዩም፣ የማለዳ ድብባ (2009፣ ገጽ 33)</p>	<p>Fighting and Art "When he was given a shield to fight, He gave it to his mom for spading dung" (Kererto) The beginning of wisdom, Is fear of fighting; Taming the spade; Making a dung spade out of a shield. (My translation)</p>
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David Adams in his *The History of the Culture of War* (2008) lists a number of factors that characterize a culture of war, among which the use of art and culture to glorify and thereby justify war, is one. Rather than using art and culture toward the culture of peace in general and peacebuilding in particular, artistic platforms often appear to have rather ended up nourishing the culture of war. In some instances, of course, due to current circumstances, art and artistic platforms reportedly play a bellicose agency. Platforms that were created for open discourse and common concern got either co-opted or at worst hijacked by nationalistic sentiments lopsided to one camp resulting in a feeling of exclusion by another.

While commenting on the role art and culture play in Ethiopia, many informants mentioned the political role art, especially music, plays through its service as a voice for the oppressed. For instance, Alemayehu, an informant from Oromia, noted,

"Music has always been at the heart of political movements and in the struggles of the Oromo people in their political quest for freedom and equality. Such iconic generations of musicians as Ali Birra and Haccalu Hundessa had always been a catalytic force, a symbol and vice of resistance in the struggle of the people against various regimes" (Interview 16: 18.8.2022).

Indeed, from shepherds to Azmaris to modern day pop artists, there are brave artists who questioned authority and challenged the political status quo of their times. That is why in Ethiopia rulers, in order to know what society's feelings toward their governance was like, used to ask, "what are the shepherds saying, or what are the Azmaris saying?" said Misrak, the co-founder of Tobiya Poetic Jazz. Misrak also raised an interesting historical note about Italians, upon their brief occupation of the country, were said to have primarily targeted the Azmaris to confiscate their Masingos (a violin-like stringed traditional musical instrument of the Azmaris) since the former knew well what the place of the latter was in society. As the above quote from an informant also reminds us and as the old adage "A pen is mightier than a sword" goes, the Kirar can be as lethal as the Klash but the former has an even greater power, for it can also be used to make peace. Thus, the power of art in its various forms in Ethiopia (poetry of the Azmaris, shilela, fukera, kererto, gerersa, and other war songs in various languages) during the various wars the country fought in its long history is a well-documented.

"In using historical materials, art or the artist appears to have an inevitable tendency to selectively sanitize or monumentalize one fact, on the one hand, and to trivialize and minimize, another fact, on the other." Agegnehu Adane, Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, Addis Ababa University

Now, the question is as much as art or the artist is instrumental in boosting the morale of society, say by "monumentalizing", as Agegnehu remarks, a given aspect of history to infuse feelings of heroism and bravery at times of war framed as 'just war', one wonders what distance art or the artist would travel to subdue the belligerent rhetoric at times of war toward redirecting the attention of society to peaceful means. In fact, the culture of war in general is overwhelmingly dominant which one can hardly escape from. Thus, it would be difficult to overcome its hegemonic presence in 'normal times' as well, never mind during imminent war that threatens the survival of society or of a country. Thus, one can argue that whether knowingly or inadvertently, art, especially in its oral and traditional form, appears to be inevitably nourishing the perennial and prevailing culture of war that often comes disguised in patriotism and nationalism. This, however, is not by any means to undermine the role art plays in boosting the morale of society at times of decisive hard times that necessitate citizens to defend the very existence of their society or country.

Almost all participants of this study underlined the power and puissance of art in positively affecting society. However, how powerful is art or the artist in the face of an overwhelming narrative of war? For example, the recent war in Ethiopia has contrasting narratives that has overwhelmed the artist. Since an all-open war broke out between the TPLF and the Federal Government of Ethiopia in November 2020, there has been a deep-rooted difference in the portrayal of the war. While supporters of the TPLF spin the narratives of genocide, ethnic cleansing, humanitarian aid blockade, etc., the opposite camp including the government has been depicting the war as 'existent-

"For those who know how to use it, the Kirar is as powerful as the Klash"

*Sisay Mengiste,
Selam Ethiopia*

tial war' (የኅልውና ጦርነት). The latter is underpinned by the notion of just war in that the TPLF, which was designated by the Parliament as a terrorist group, has been widely regarded as an aggressor and traitor. Thus, any attempt to question the war or to advocate for peace at such a critical moment where sense of patriotism was high would only backfire on whoever comes up with such a message – however noble the message may sound (see for example the case of Singer Tariku Gankasi, a.k.a Dishta Gina, below). This was a moment several artists were rallying for the war.

In addition to producing artistic works to galvanize the public for the war, some artists went even as far as marching to the war front. Whether seen as member of society or as agent of peace by virtue of their artistic prowess, artists are not islands who remain an outlier amidst overwhelming and infectious emotions of patriotism. As Bar-Tal (2009, p. 387) remarks, "Individuals and groups always rally sooner and more easily to the banner of fear, dehumanization, hostility and hate than to the banner of trust, cooperation and respect of the other." It thus seems to take a lot for an artist to overcome the hegemonic narratives and emotions of the day since it necessitates probably sacrifice of various forms (economic, political, psychological, etc.) to come out with a peace-oriented artistic work or gesture. As the contemporary poet Bewketu Seyoum in the above quote notes, "such an artist must be a hermit of his time" to come up with a decent artistic work marked by serenity or tranquility amidst a chaotic or violent situation in a given society or country. In connection with this, let us see three cases: one that unfolded right after the outbreak of the northern war, one amidst the war, and another one more recently following the massacre of hundreds of civilians in Western Oromia Region.

Below are a few specific cases or examples that would give a glimpse of the current status of the sector and illuminate the challenges that appear to impede the sector not to contribute to peacebuilding:

Proliferation of pop-cum-ethnic music

The last few decades have already seen in Ethiopia songs in various languages with contents that incite hatred, bigotry, ethnocentrism, etc. that are more often than not come dressed up in asserting cultural identities and expressing political and cultural injustices. Even worse, following the outbreak of the war between the TPLF and the Federal Government, pop-cum-folk music emerged having been re-appropriated to galvanize ethnic solidarity. YouTube is the major platform for releasing such single albums whose main themes are ethnic glorifications, on the one hand, and vilification of a group that is regarded as enemy, on the other. Some singers clear appeal in their songs to 'their own' people to stand vigilant and remain on guard for a possible attack from the enemy while others invoke past glories and allude to heroes and heroines of historical proportion. In doing so, they appear to transmit an unambiguous message to their essential Other, if not enemy, that a clear wall has been built between their group and the other ethnic group. Needless to mention such a sentiment, which reverberates in the warring parties, nourished the war by fanning the flames. One of the typical characteristics of such songs is that their traditional repertoires are re-appropriated for the purpose of the day so much so that they come in 'cultural dress' that essentially

defines the group's ethnic identity. It should be made clear here though the use of art to galvanize the morale of society and create a sense of solidarity should not be mistaken as essentially belligerent behavior. The point that is being made here is that the narrative and corresponding portrayal of one group made against the other is enormously dangerous while the same art form could have been used to soothe the apparent impulses of war and of vengeance that appeared to have been rampant in society.

YeHager Lij, YeMar Eij Charity Initiative by the arts community: A case of Cancel Culture?

One of the main criticisms, if not vitriolic attacks, thrown by the opposing voices was that artists who remained allegedly silent on the issue of displacement and brutal killings in the recent past should not come out with this message of charity.

Another case worthy of a brief look into would be a charity initiative that some artists initiated following the start of war between the Tigray Regional State and the Federal Government. No sooner did the war in northern Ethiopia break out than a group of prominent artists (singers, actors, writers, etc.) under a committee named ጥበብ ለሀገር (Art for Country) started an initiative to mobilize resources to support people affected by the "Law Enforcement Operation" in the Tigray Region. The program, which was conceived by veteran and young artists and collaboratively designed with the Ministry of Peace, also went to the extent of opening a bank account to which both Ethiopians in the country as well as in the diaspora contribute for the cause. However, the initiative was short-lived. After a few days of public advocacy works for resource mobilization by forming a task force, an opposing voice started to simmer, especially on social media that entertained strong criticisms involving from insults to threatening to boycott consuming the artists' works, the totality of which is a glimpse of the Cancel Culture in Ethiopia. One of the main criticisms, if not vitriolic attacks, thrown by the opposing voices was that artists who remained allegedly silent on the issue of displacement and brutal killings in the recent past should not come out with this message of charity. Following the intense criticism and controversy, the mobilization effort was aborted. And some artists who were part of the effort had to come out and apologize in public having succumbed to the opposing voices, which were very bitter and intimidating. Taking a metaphoric name, YeHager Lij, yeMar Ej (which roughly means compatriots, sweet hands) referring apparently to the sense of belongingness one feels when supporting one of their own, in contrast perhaps to the aid that comes from elsewhere to which political and other strings are often attached. Though it was not meant to be, it is worth noting that if the initiative had gone as planned, it would have been one of the exemplary joint efforts by artists and a peace actor in the shape of the Ministry of Peace.

If the creative prowess of an artwork is not powerful enough to overwhelm the mass during times of war, one seems to end up being regarded as a villain, if not an enemy, no matter how noble the message may be. This is exactly what happened to Tariku Gankasi (also known as Dishta Gina after his hit single album), who appeared to have used the stage of a national event called ሀገራን እጠብቃለሁ፤ መስዋዕትነት እከፍላለሁ (I protect my country; I pay the sacrifices) to which he was invited to sing, as a preaching ground for what could be termed as pacifist message.

“...Let elders go there, not the youth to the battlefield. Mediation should be the means, not a gunpoint. I myself went to the battlefield but it was futile for it meant killing my brother...”

However, he opted for a rather plain “peace lecture” than using a creative means. According to an informant “His message was not only untimely but also lacking a creative means” (Interview 1, 23.05.2022). In fact, except that he is a singer whose single album was a local and global hit at that time, he arguably made no effort to use a creative way of advocating for peace. His attempt was a misfire, so to say, that subsequently subjected him for vilification and alleged

intimidation. Our informant continues, “At times of such prevalent sense of overwhelming nationalism and patriotism, no force, not even religion, can win the heart of people or tame the emotions” (Ibid). As a result, a message as noble as of peace will only receive a deaf ear, if not spark vitriolic reactions. Tariku’s own impassioned words at the very event and his starkly contrasting apologetic reactions in the aftermath are both worthy of quotes below:

“I am not hear to sing [...] If one does not learn from

music or from songs, what is the point of singing? We have not learnt enough even if we were taught by religious fathers, pastors, or by Muslim teachers. If we have failed to learn through these means, music can hardly teach us. Why would I sing? It is no longer good for us to put on black dresses. Enough with black dresses. Enough! Enough! Let elders go there, not the youth to the battlefield. Mediation should be the means, not a gunpoint. What? I myself went to the battlefield but it was futile for it meant killing my brother [...]” (Tariku Gankisa <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okQEAKb13V0> translation by researcher)

It is also worth noting that just like the organizers of the above charity initiative did, following a widespread online vilifications and controversies, Tariku also had to publicly and tearfully apologize in front of a camera by appearing in a television studio:

“I disappointed the public. I was very emotional. I wasn’t myself. I did not understand the platform’s purpose. I apologize but it was not to advance anyone else’s agenda. It was my own fault.” (Tariku Dishta Gina: November 13, 2021 [ebstv worldwide, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbaclyDd4Ik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbaclyDd4Ik) Translation by researcher)

The point here is not about whether Tariku or the detractors of his actions then were right or wrong. It is rather to underline the challenge peace faces especially under emotionally overwhelming circumstance. While the very silence of art and the artist at times of crisis is even worse, their involvement, however, should be nuanced as it can have productive or destructive consequences.

The Polemics of two pop singers: Tedy Afro and Abel Mulugeta

While this study was underway, there was a massacre of Amharas in Western Oromia. Right in the aftermath, the singer Teddy Afro released what appears to be a politically charged single album titled ናዕት/Na’et that seems to criticize the apparent laxity and/or incapability of the Federal Government in ensuring rule of law and protecting citizens’ security. The divided public uproar on social media from seemingly two opposing camps of Ethiopians is worthy of a closer examination. While some proponents of the ruling party were against Teddy Afro, the large majority of people heaped praise on the artist remarking his consistency in his solid political position across different regimes in Ethiopia. It is important to note that Teddy’s detractors criticize him for spinning people’s emotions for financial gains by releasing his single albums at times of heightened political and national sentiments, referring mostly to the release of his album Yasteserial in which he unabashedly criticized the regime during the 2005 National Election. Others, on the contrary, are appreciative of his creative genius for responding to moments of national significance such as athletic victories and football related successes. Be that as it may, most recently, a few days after the release of Teddy’s album, Abel Mulugeta released his own single album titled ከዳር ቆሞ/Kedar Komo in an apparent fireback to Teddy’s apparent criticism of the government. Consequently, the two albums were a subject of intense debate and controversy on social media outlets among Ethiopians creating polarized camps of opinions along lines of not only political affiliations but also ethnicities.

This may not be a new phenomenon or unique to Ethiopia since popular music has always been a subject of political controversy that leads even up to subsequent banning (see Adams 2008) and boycotting of certain musicians and their works. What is important here is that beyond its polemical nature, popular music can nourish narratives of divisions in what appears to be already a fragile society and add fuel to the flames of polarized politics, especially at times of political crisis and instability. This suggests an obligation for art and artists to at least refrain from catalysing conflicts by adding fuel to inter-ethnic or inter-group polarizations, on the one hand, and to at best stand for peace and serve as instrument and agent of peace, on the other.

Tariku Gankasi’s ‘untimely’ plea for peace at Meskel Square?

“... I wasn’t myself. I did not understand the platform’s purpose. I apologize but it was not to advance anyone else’s agenda...”

1. 1.3. Political instrumentalization of arts and culture?

In Ethiopia, as stipulated in the National Culture Policy, art and culture are expected to be of service to peace and development of the country. In the section that defined the necessity of the very policy, the policy document particularly states that it seeks "To enable cultural establishments to play significant role in the country's program to bring in peace, development and democracy." According to informants, it is essential to disentangle art from political cliché of 'developmentalism'. While the role of art and culture in social and economic development is undeniable, politicians appear to misuse and misappropriate art and culture for political ends. According to an informant, "our politicians need art and the artist in no different way from one needs a wedding-party accessory just for the duration of the wedding. Once the wedding is over, nobody cares about the accessories." (Interview 8: 17.06.2022) My informant was referring to the occasional 'political instrumentalism' of art and the artists in Ethiopia. He added that small gestures of respect that would otherwise sustain a respectful relationship between the artists and the government are not offered to artists: "They [politicians] provide us vehicles and other facilities until we perform at a given event, but once the event is over, nobody would care about us, rather giving us a feeling of 'used and thrown.'" (Ibid) This supports the other challenge noted above about the apparent disregard and undervaluation of the power of art.

On the other hand, in Ethiopia the so-called ethno-federalist and unionist camps of political elites have been spearheading the country's body politic for quite some time now. While both have their own narratives and followers, the creative sector appears to be no exception in falling under either of the two camps. In other words, amidst such polarization over the conception of the Ethiopian statehood, art or the artist appears to struggle in maintaining the golden balance such that artists whether they like it or not, consciously or inadvertently, find themselves in one camp and seem to appeal to the followers or constituencies of one particular camp through their 'creative works'. In other words, it seems difficult or impossible for such artists to create a third possibility that accommodates or represents the interests and voices of both sides. This is not to mean that the artist should play 'bothsidesism' but rather to underline the courage and the will artists need in order to stand for truth. While artists, as members of society may be influenced by social norms and expectations, their artistic responsibilities, however, should elevate them above and beyond narrow allegiance to ethnic and identitarian politics that instrumentalizes art to justify ethnic superiority that in turn leads to ethno-political polarization in the society.

"...too poor to influence or to withstand pressure"

Probed why artists in Ethiopia do not appear to have social and political clout to influence public opinions as well as politicians do, one artist informant hesitantly responded as follows:

"... maybe some of us are too poor to influence or to withstand political or financial pressures. But why do some notable artists blow with the wind? I think it is because they follow where economic benefits are, where power lies... such artists would easily trade off art or their talent for lentils. And they have no shame when they change their 'jersey' when regimes change." (Interview 5: 07.06.2022).

What our informant meant to say should be put into perspectives. One is that individual artists' lack of economic independence appears to make them vulnerable to political pressures either by direct financial influence or indirect pressure resulting in fear of telling truth to challenge power as economically vulnerable artists cannot afford to confront power. This, however, is not to say that there are no artists who did not challenge power only because they are economically powerless. What does these have to do with peace and art? The answer is that one who fails or fears to tell truth due, for example, to lack of economic autonomy can hardly be a peace agent as peace itself can hardly be conceived if it is devoid of truth and justice – ideals which true art stands for.

Uneven opportunity: Regional mapping of art for peace initiatives in Ethiopia

In addition to the above challenges, informants, especially from regions, pointed out several other challenges the sector is facing. The following are a few of them:

- The provision of artistic infrastructure in regional cities
- Artistic initiatives limited to the capital or regional capital cities, i.e., concerts and arts exhibitions often confined to Addis Ababa and in rare cases in regional capitals
- The relative low taste of people for artistic works
- Resource limitations
- Lack of due attention by regional governments to the sector
- Awareness of society such as family pressure against youngsters not to pursue the art profession

While most of these challenges may still be true to the capital and regional capitals, some challenges are unique to and acute in regional, woreda, and zonal levels whose artistic and cultural activities are either poor or non-existent at all.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

By way of exploring the role that art and culture play in peacebuilding in Ethiopia the study looked into the challenges and opportunities of the sector. The exploration afforded the following tentative conclusions and findings:

Art and culture nourishing the culture of war

It is worth noting that the culture of war is a hegemonic state that grips the social, economic, cultural and political affairs of society. It is so overwhelming that it breeds in the bone of almost every aspect of life such that the arts and culture sector can hardly escape from. It is worth reiterating that the culture of war reveals itself in more direct or explicit ways such as in intercommunal conflict, intolerance, ethnic-, sectarian- and gender-based violence as well as in such indirect forms as in corruption, injustice, oppression, etc. The current study revealed that, in Ethiopia, art and culture are apparently nourishing the prevailing culture of war. It is almost a norm to find artists, especially musicians, involved in galvanizing the public to rally behind what is often regarded as a 'just war'. While art and the artist can justifiably become instrumental in standing for a just cause of safeguarding the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation, it is, however, very rare finding art and the artist as an alternative voice of peace and stability during heightened belligerent emotions and narratives. Instead, artists appear to jump on the bandwagon of the bellicose rhetoric. It is also worth noting that such behaviour of art and the artist is not just of at times of active and 'just' war but also of at the so-called 'normal' times, during which it reveals itself, for instance, in glorifying past triumphs. Moreover, sitting idle or not discharging its potential to sustain peace by nurturing harmonious co-existence, tolerance, unity and consensus during 'normal' times but making its presence felt at times of war would only make art an enterprise responsive primarily to war or belligerent rhetoric that often presents itself cocooned in patriotism and nationalism.

Art and culture overwhelmed by and fanning ethnic politics

An extension of the above characteristics, arts and culture appear to struggle to withstand the overwhelming puissance of identity politics in Ethiopia. From literary works that openly incite ethnic hatred, grudge, grievance and sense of disunity between societies to musical productions that fan inter-ethnic divides and suspicion, as well as the age-old oral artistic forms that appear to denigrate others in the name of glorifying one's own heroism and socio-historical pride, arts and culture in Ethiopia do not seem to have escaped the gripping identity-based political ethos of the day. The artist, as noted before, may not be expected to be neutral or to shy away altogether from politics; however, the virtuous use of their creative prowess and potential toward peace, social cohesion and co-existence is yet to be well explored and exploited. As a result, notwithstanding its immense potential, the sector in Ethiopia, especially in the regions, remains to be an untapped capital, which calls for due investment by government and by the private sector as well as for a greater sense of responsibility on the part of the artist alike.

Trading off artistic freedom for economic gains

Artists should not necessarily and all the time be at odds with political regimes. However, undue and unwarranted or unprincipled relations with rulers and politicians that puts them in a difficult position to stand for truth and in collusion course with society, especially when the latter is opposing the regime, is very problematic. As a result, art and artists are viewed as mouthpieces of political regimes. Due partly to the sector's unrewarding economic gains, anyone with a financial clout appears to outmuscle artists to compromise their artistic freedom and succumb to be instrumental to the political causes of the 'outbidder'. As a result, there appears to exist today in Ethiopia two groups of artists: one, a palace artist, and the other is a public artist. The former, as the name implies serves the interest of politicians or a regime while the latter of the society. The most intriguing feature of the former is their agility to tune themselves with political order of the day. The point here, as well noted above, is not to demand of artists to necessarily be against regimes, but rather to stand for truth and be of service to society. When they do so, they can become agents of peace and stability, which requires standing for and becoming voice of truth and justice.

Uneven distribution of artistic activities

While the question of cultural rights demands access to artistic and cultural activities in society, most of such events and efforts in Ethiopia take place in the Capital Addis Ababa. As such the artistic and cultural dividends, so to say, appear to mirror that of the politics of centre-periphery dynamics of Ethiopian politics. Moreover, it sounds to be a bit of a paradox that artistic efforts are used to promote peace in the relatively peaceful city of Addis Ababa and in capitals of regional states while the most conflict-affected areas as well as the culturally-rich places in the regions are conspicuously absent in the map of such initiatives in the country. This clearly calls for the serving of distributive justice in the artistic and cultural infrastructure for regional states of the country.

Are we expecting too much of the sector?

Last but not least is a finding of this study that has come, in a bit of unconventional fashion, in the shape of questions: Are we asking too much of the sector? How can the sector of art and culture perform for peace, stability and serenity while the artist and their works are themselves products of the absence of these virtues? If artists are not islands in a society, how can they escape nourishing the culture of war in a society that arguably glorifies war and heroism? Where there is little or no serious regard for and investment in the art and culture sector, why do we expect to reap the benefits of arts and culture?

5.2. Recommendations

Below are a few recommendations that have stemmed from the analysis and findings of the study. They are hoped to give directions to design intervention projects to address the challenges and enhance the opportunities and best practices of the sector so it effectively plays its role in peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

The importance of arts' nuanced engagement with patriotism, war and politics

Art and artists should take a critical distance especially during times of intense and overwhelming national and patriotic sentiments toward playing their critical role as agent of peace and stability. Art and culture, while their role to mobilize the public for safeguarding the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation maybe justified, should remain voices of peace and stability during times of active war and of reconciliation and healing in post-conflict contexts. However, artists' role in the latter stage of conflict is highly incumbent upon their behaviour during war times. Moreover, if art is to truly become a positive and autonomous force in society, its relations with politics must be put into perspective. Art cannot and should not altogether shy away from politics. However, its unwarranted relations must be questioned and the so-called 'art for development' mantra, a rather euphemistic appellation for political instrumentalization of art, must be demystified.

Bridging two actors: Artists to promote peace and peace agents to leverage art

The study also revealed that the current institutional setups in the shape of the Ministry of Peace, which values and recognizes the role of artistic works for the promotion of peacebuilding and national consensus, can be viewed as a window of opportunity for the Ethiopian arts and culture sector to play its role as peace agent. On the other hand, the recently revitalized Ministry of Culture and Sports (formerly Ministry of Culture and Tourism), by virtue of its duties and responsibilities to cultivate the creative sector, has immense potential in boosting the capacity of the sector to be a positive force in the peace and stability of the country. Now, if such institutions have, in their respective duties and responsibilities, unambiguous and uncontested roles to contribute to the peace and stability of the country, a synergetic approach that allows an interface of common goals would not only consolidate efforts but also avoids fragmentation and unnecessary duplication of efforts. Above all, since peace requires cooperation, collaboration and harmonious relations between institutions as much as among individuals, it is only natural for these two ministries and other peace actors and art/culture agents to combine efforts for a better future.

The need for a culture of dialogue in the arts and culture sector

Needless to say, peace begins from oneself. Any individual or entity that is not in peace with itself can hardly make a difference in bringing peace to others. Dialogue effort already attempted within the art community also reaffirmed that the sector should first of all know its potentials and limits. For this to happen, it should engage in genuine and self-reflexive intra-sector dialogues toward building a sense of community, consensus, unity and harmony within its sector, for anything short of this is not likely to bear fruit in the realm of peace. Thus, a continuous culture of dialogue must be cultivated within the arts and culture community if the sector can really become a peace agent or actor in the country, if not beyond.

Pedagogy of art as pedagogy of peace: Dovetailing art education and peace education

The interview held with Agegnehu Adane, Director of the Ale School of Fine Arts and Designs – Addis Ababa University, brought up an interesting discussion that likened pedagogy of art to pedagogy of peace. This calls, among others, for the fusion of peace education with art education. As limited and themselves with various challenges as they are, the current art schools already have the opportunity to just consciously infuse peace and notions of peace with purpose in their teachings. In other words, since art education already has inherent qualities that cut cross section with elements of peace, the field does not appear to reinvent the wheel to be a peace agent anew. All it needs to do, it appears, is to just be aware that the pedagogy of art can be and is an effective pedagogy of peace, for "art has an inherent quality of peace," as Agegnehu Adane noted. Therefore, with already existing art education and thanks to the newly introduced curricula that has given due attention to art education, it only requires a little reorientation to leverage art's potential for building, nurturing and sustaining a holistic peace, in young Ethiopians. Therefore, packaging art in peace education or harnessing peace in art education can forge a strong link toward leveraging the potentials of the two fields.

Research on the diverse potentials of art and culture for peacebuilding

The role of art and culture in peacebuilding in Ethiopia is a barely explored area in both academic and policy arenas. Given the huge capabilities of the sector in positively impacting society, the area calls for more research to unravel its various potentials. For instance, it can be explored its potential in Ethiopia as early-warning system, in healing and reconciliation in post-conflict period, in nurturing positive peace and culture of dialogue, in national unity, national consensus, co-existence and tolerance, etc. The very lens of viewing the benefits of art and culture, especially, in post-conflict reconstruction must be recalibrated. That is, beyond using artistic and cultural platforms for crowd-funding post-conflict reconstruction efforts, tapping the potential of the arts for the psychosocial dimension of the process in the form of healing and reconciliation should be well explored.

Table 3: Summary of identified gaps and recommended interventions

No	Context/Gaps	Recommended intervention areas and approaches
1	Loose inter-institutional connection, fragmentations and unnecessary duplication of efforts. Eg. Ministry of Peace vs. Ministry of Culture	Build institutional synergy that allows an interface of common goals and consolidated efforts (Inter-Ministerial & Inter-sectoral MoUs, etc.) Creating platforms to bridge the two fields: Artists to promote peace, peace actors to leverage art Co-designing common projects that employ arts and culture for peacebuilding
2.	A sector responsive more to war campaigns (as a result arts and culture appearing to nourish the culture of war)	Engage the art and peace sector in sustainable peace rather than and in addition to Recognizing artistic and cultural creative works promoting peace Sensitizing the arts and culture community with their roles in peacebuilding
3	Less appreciated, if not undervalued/misappropriated, power of the arts and culture sector for peacebuilding and national consensus	Awareness raising activities in the political & policy arena Depoliticizing the arts and culture sector Sensitizing the private sector to invest in arts and culture sector to eventually decouple the sector from government and political influence (i.e., creating arts-business-peace nexus) Doing research and publication on the potential of arts and culture
4	Loose connection between arts and peace education	Lobbying and advocacy works for pedagogy art to become pedagogy peace Arts and Peace clubs in schools
5	Apparently weak intra-sectoral peace and harmony in the arts and culture sector	Building culture of dialogue in the arts and culture community Using art forms as dialogue instrument
6	Uneven distribution of arts and culture facilities in regions	Design projects that help ensure distributive justice in the cultural rights of citizens living outside capital cities Developing region-based artistic talent development programs Lobbying regional governments to allocate budget for cultural investments

5.3. Limitations

The current study had a limited scope in terms of the genres of arts and culture it explored in the country. It only took the creative realms of the sector such that it, for example, did not incorporate such areas of culture as sports, media, traditional belief systems, etc. Moreover, the study did not analyse or interpret specific artistic works or their contents. It instead relied by and large on interviews and a bit of document reviews of direct relevance as to understand the challenges, opportunities and best practices of the sector. Thus, future studies on the subject would gain better depth and insight if they consider these missing aspects of the current study.

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