

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ARTS-BASED APPROACHES IN SUSTAINING CULTURAL PRACTICES AMONG INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN BAKASSI CAMP, BORNO STATE

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of arts-based approaches (ABA) in sustaining traditional cultural practices among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) residing in Bakassi Camp, Borno State, Nigeria. With displacement disrupting the cultural continuity of affected communities, particularly in the aftermath of the Boko Haram insurgency, this research highlights the critical role of arts visual representation, in preserving cultural identity and promoting psychological healing. By engaging displaced individuals in creative workshops, the study aimed to assess the effectiveness of using artistic methodologies in creating a conducive environment to explore challenges and opportunities of cultural continuity within the camp setting and offering evidence for integrating cultural preservation into humanitarian interventions. The findings this research underscore the importance of arts as both a therapeutic tool and a means of fostering social cohesion in post-conflict settings, especially amongst the Internally Displaced.

Keywords: Internally Displaced Persons, Arts-Based Approaches, Traditional Music, Cultural Preservation, Bakassi Camp, Psychological Healing, Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion

Introduction

Borno State, the epicenter of Boko Haram insurgency, has seen the largest number of displaced persons. Among these displaced populations, the Kanuri ethnic group, native to the region, have faced the imminent threat of losing their cultural practices, particularly traditional music and other forms of art that are central to their identity (Oluwagbemiga, 2017). The displacement crisis has further led to the cultural erosion amongst the Internally displaced persons (IDP). The study, conducted in Bakassi Camp in 2019, Borno State, investigates the potential effectiveness of arts-based interventions, specifically through traditional music and visual arts, as tools for sustaining cultural practices among the displaced. Furthermore, it aims to understand how such practices can promote psychological healing, social cohesion, and collective resilience in a post-trauma environment. This displacement crisis caused by the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast has led to a staggering number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020), over two million Nigerians were displaced within the country. The impact of displacement extends beyond the loss of homes and livelihoods to encompass significant cultural disruptions. The forced relocation of individuals often results in the loss of social structures, rituals, and practices that are integral to the identity of individuals and their community. Though there have been a lot of interventions by non-governmental institutions and governmental using different strategies such as workshops, talks, town hall meetings, there seems to exist some gaps that are still of concern. Hence this study aims to explore a different kind of approach which with foundations within artistic proponent by studying the effectiveness of arts-based research to bridge this gap.

Arts-based approaches (ABA) such as music, dance, drama, drawing are increasingly recognized for their role in both mental health recovery and cultural preservation in conflict-affected settings (Eyong, 2022; Ogunleye, 2023). According to Leighton and Pelham (2007), creative interventions not only provide therapeutic benefits but also offer displaced individuals a means of reconnecting with their cultural heritage. This article highlights how such interventions can contribute to the long-term well-being of IDPs by offering them opportunities for self-expression, cultural education, and collective healing.

Arts a Cultural Preservation Tool in Displacement Settings

The erosion of cultural identity is a critical concern among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), particularly in regions like Borno State, where prolonged insurgency has disrupted the traditional ways of life of the people. Arts-based Approaches (ABAs) have emerged as vital tools for sustaining intangible cultural heritage. Recent studies in African displacement contexts demonstrate how performative and visual arts help communities retain collective memory.

For instance, among the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, traditional dance (Agwara) and song repertoires have been strategically adapted in camp settings to preserve cultural narratives for a long time with evidence of success (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2021). Similarly, in Nigeria, the Durbar festival a historically significant ceremony among Hausa-Fulani communities has been re-enacted in IDP camps like Bakassi to reinforce cultural continuity and social cohesive living amongst the IDP's (Abdullahi & Danjibo, 2023). Another example is the Bori spirit possession dance, a native dance performance of the Hausa people in Sokoto, Kano and Katsina, which despite its religious significance, has been modified into secular performances to ensure its survival among displaced communities (Adamu, 2022). This modification has also been largely due to the assimilation of popular cultural performance and the change in demographics, though the dance still maintains its cultural essence (Adamu, 2022). Looking further inward is an initiative such as the Saving Heritage Art and Culture (SHAC) project in Bakassi camp which employed storytelling and craft-making to document Kanuri proverbs, folktales, and weaving techniques (Bala, 2023). Such efforts have proven to align with UNESCO's (2022) framework on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in crisis zones, emphasizing ABAs as an effective counterforce against cultural amnesia and eventual phasing out.

Objective

The objective of this research is to explore the effectiveness of arts-based approaches in sustaining traditional cultural practices among Internally Displaced Persons using two different arts base approaches.

Scope of the Study

The geographical scope of the study is Maiduguri Borno State, delimited to Bakassi camp, while the population of the study was taken from a sample number of Internally Displaced persons living within the Bakassi Camp.

Literature Review

Arts-based approaches in displacement contexts have gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in relation to their therapeutic and cultural value. Scholars have explored the impact of arts in both war-torn societies and refugee camps, finding that arts can help displaced individuals process trauma, rebuild social bonds, and maintain cultural continuity (Harris, 2019; Mernissi, 2018). In a similar vein, this study builds on existing research (Eyong, 2022; Ogunleye, 2023; Leighton, 2007) by examining how visual representations can foster a sense of belonging and identity among IDPs in Bakassi Camp.

Visual Arts and Cultural Identity

Visual arts, including painting, drawing, and sculpture, are similarly powerful tools for personal expression and cultural preservation. As noted by Dissanayake (2015), visual arts can communicate emotions that words cannot, making them an ideal medium for displaced individuals to express complex feelings of loss, displacement, and hope. In the context of Bakassi Camp, the art of visuality provided participants with a platform to represent their experiences of conflict and envision a peaceful future, offering a creative outlet for suppressed traumatic feelings and a means of asserting cultural identity. This was achieved through a drawing participatory method in form of drawing sessions.

Cultural Continuity in Displacement Contexts

Cultural preservation is a significant concern for displaced communities, who often experience a rupture in their cultural practices and knowledge transmission due to displacement. According to Gergen, et al. (2001), cultural practices are not merely symbolic means of expressions but are central to an individual's sense of identity. For IDPs, particularly in the aftermath of violent conflict, the disruption of these cultural practices can exacerbate feelings of alienation and despair which might lead an individual self-alienation or depression. In this context, arts-based approaches become instrumental in ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage.

However, sustaining cultural practices in displacement settings presents several challenges, such as the disruption of certain systems that have been established already with the continuous addition of internally displaced person who come anew with a different view. The disruption of social structures, loss of access to cultural materials, and the overwhelming need for survival often impede the ability of displaced persons to engage in cultural activities (Harris, 2019). Despite these challenges, arts interventions that engage displaced persons in the process of cultural education and creative expression can serve as a lifeline, preserving cultural practices while simultaneously promoting social integration and healing.

Psychosocial and Communal Benefits of Arts-Based Interventions

Beyond cultural preservation, ABAs have served and is still serving as therapeutic tools, addressing trauma and fostering social cohesion among displaced populations as has been shown in the different context above. Research has shown that these participatory arts interventions have been particularly effective in mitigating the psychological impacts of conflict. Such examples are a study in 2023 conducted in Bakassi Camp which revealed that drama therapy programs significantly reduced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among displaced children, with

collective performances restoring a sense of normalcy and peer support (Mohammed and Shehu, 2023). A further example is a Kenyan study conducted in Kakuma refugee camp with parallel findings where visual arts workshops enabled displaced youth to process traumatic experiences through painting and sculpture, improving emotional regulation (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2022). More reference to ABA is on the pivotal role music played an initiative in South Sudan called the "Arts for Peace" which was used communal songwriting to bridge ethnic divisions among displaced groups, demonstrating how collaborative artistic expression can rebuild trust (African Arts Institute, 2022). In Nigeria, the "Music for Healing" project in Borno incorporated traditional Goge (fiddle) music into trauma counseling sessions, reporting enhanced emotional resilience among participants (Dauda and Yusuf, 2024).

Compounding Theoretical Underpinning

Arts-based approaches (ABAs) have a dual function in displaced communities, as both acts of cultural resistance and vehicles for psychosocial healing which presents a compelling area for theoretical examination in this research. This discussion analyzes these intertwined roles through the complementary frameworks of Cultural Resilience Theory (Eyong, 2022), with empirical grounding from Nigeria's Bakassi IDP Camp. The analysis reveals how this theory collectively explains ABAs' transformative potential in contexts of systemic oppression and collective trauma. They further empathize the importance that visual representations hold with such a framework as the two theories.

Cultural Resilience Theory: Arts as Resistance to Cultural Erasure

Eyong's (2022) Cultural Resilience Theory provides critical insights into how displaced communities employ artistic expression as resistance against cultural annihilation his example is one taken from Bakassi Camp. This manifests through

1. Subversive Cultural Preservation: using a practical example from Adamu's (2022) covert continuation of the Bori spirit dance, whose performance historically was banned by the insurgents, has demonstrated how artistic practice can become acts of defiance.
2. Reclamation of Narratives: in the project 'Stories of Our Fathers' theatre production, singular trauma narratives was challenged by dramatizing pre-displacement life (Mohammed and Shehu, 2023). This agrees with Eyong's (2022) stipulation which terms 'counter-memory work' using performances to construct collective identity, beyond victimhood framework.

Nonetheless, limitations can be identified in policy applications. While Cultural Resilience theory effectively explains grassroots resistance, it inadequately addresses structural barriers like the exclusion of arts from the Nigerian IDP Policy.

In summary, the above discussion demonstrates that cultural resilience theory could provide a robust framework to aid the understanding of ABA's as both a shield) against cultural erasure) and to salve (for collective trauma). Its integration in policy briefs offers policymakers a foundation for psychosocial recovery.

Methodology

This study adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach, which emphasized the active involvement of participants in the research process. PAR is particularly well-suited for contexts involving vulnerable populations such as the IDP's in this context, as it empowers participants to take ownership of the research process and ensures that their voices are heard (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The study was conducted in Bakassi Camp, Borno State, a site that houses thousands of IDPs who have fled the Boko Haram insurgency.

Sample Population

The participants in this study were adult men and women, adolescent boys and adolescent girls, with a focus on those who were interested. The rationale for involving both the older and younger generations was to facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, which is essential for the preservation of cultural practices and ideologies on the concept of peace amongst the community

(Gergen et al., 2001). A total of 40 participants took part in the workshops: 15 adolescent boys and 15 adolescent girls, who were selected based on their interest to participate in the drawing sessions. The 10 adults was as a guiding cover who represented the leadership within the community.

Workshop Structure

The workshops were structured around two key themes: (1) promoting peace through visual arts and (2) feedback sessions by the adults. Each workshop was divided into three parts: a discussion session, a hands-on practical session, and a feedback session.

Drawing Sessions: The participants were asked to draw their understanding of peace and what it means to them personally, also including how it was before the Boko Haram insurgency and after the Boko Haram Insurgency. This process took two days, one day for the workshop session and the second session for drawing and feedback.

Discussion Session: Participants were invited to discuss their experiences with the drawing process and give a narration of what they drew.

Practical Session: This session included the creation of peace-oriented visual art, where participants used drawing to express their understanding of peace and coexistence.

Feedback Session: Participants were invited to share their experiences, reflect on the significance of the workshops, and suggest ways to improve cultural preservation within the camp.

Ethical consideration: The participants were all asked about their willingness to participate in the activities and if they consented to being recorded and photographed. All participants further signed consent forms to the effect.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through drawing sessions, direct observation, participant interviews, and feedback sessions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identifying key themes such as trauma recovery, cultural transmission, and the role of arts in rebuilding community bonds. The analysis aimed to assess the effectiveness of the workshops in sustaining cultural practices and promoting psychological healing.

Theme: Promoting Peace Through Visual Representation

Visual Arts as a Tool for Peacebuilding

Visual arts play a critical role in peacebuilding by allowing displaced individuals to express their hopes for the future and reflect on their experiences of conflict. In the Bakassi Camp drawing sessions, participants were asked to create visual representations of peace in a personalized context. The act of drawing provided a cathartic release for many of the participants, enabling them to process their suppressed trauma and express their aspirations for a return to normalcy.

The objective of this article is to understand the effectiveness of using arts-based approaches in concept of peace from the perspectives of a different set of IDPs, in the case those living within the Bakassi camp.

The participants in this session were displaced adolescent males and females, and adult men and women who have been living within the internally displaced camp since the destruction of their homes due to the Boko Haram crisis. The session started with a round of introduction by the facilitator where the reason for the workshop session was introduced and explained. Each participant introduced himself/herself followed by the singing local songs as ice breakers. After the introduction, the facilitator provided the participants with papers, crayons and pencils and asked them to draw what peace or peaceful coexistence means to them. The group are asked to work as individuals or as a group, whichever they felt comfortable with, and the participants swung into action and produced several images of what peace or peaceful coexistence meant to them.

One participant drew an image of a peaceful village, with children going to school and families working together in the fields. This image symbolized the hope for peace and stability in the future, as well as the desire to return to a life before the insurgency.



Plate 1, photo by Haruna, 2019. Drawing by respondent IDP7, A village setting

One participant drew an image of a peaceful village, with children going to school and families working together in the fields. According to participant IDP7 his image symbolized the hope for peace and stability in the future, as well as the desire to return to a life before the insurgency.

Another participant used the image of a bunch of broomsticks tied together to represent unity and peace. *"Just like the broomsticks are bound together, we too can come together to build peace,"* she explained. This metaphor underscores the belief that peace requires collective effort and unity, a theme that resonates across displaced communities globally (Mernissi, 2018).

After the sketching session, the facilitator asked each participant to describe what each image represented, how it translates to the meaning of peace or peaceful existence and got various responses. Some of the responses by the respondents were based on how their lives were before the insurgency and while some just drew and gave narratives on how they envision peace to be or mean. Some of the different responses from the participants were;

Participant 3 said:

"my drawing is showing Boko Haram members that came out from the bush to attack people, I was not among them but some of my family members were and those that survived told the story of what happened. So, I drew this because I want our situation to go back to before these attacks, when everything was peace and nice, when you could travel without scare that something bad will happen to you".



Plate 2; IDP9 photo by Yusuf, 2019. A male participant explaining the visual representation of peace and peaceful coexistence

Participant 2 explained:

“This group of kids came together to go to school, which was the usual practice. So, for me, if peace doesn’t exist, we can’t go to school like we used to before”.



Plate 3, photo by Haruna 2019. A female participant explaining representation of peace and peaceful coexistence.

Participant 4 said:

“I drew our house in Monguno because that is where I find peace. For me peace means the ability to go back home and live there”.

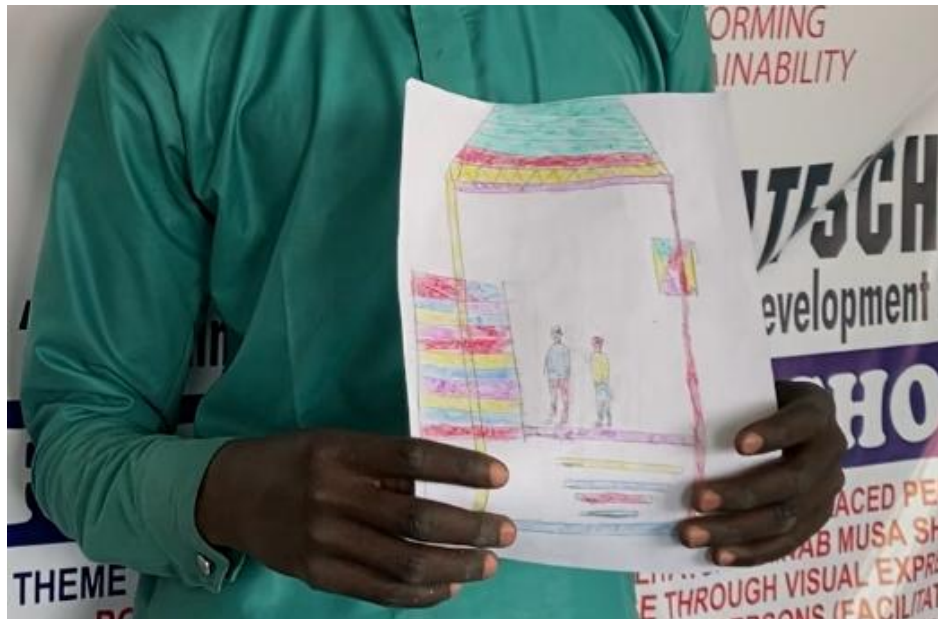


Plate 4, IDP 2 photo by Haruna 2019

Another participant used a bunch of brooms to describe what peace meant to her saying *“peace is like this bunch of broom sticks coming together to achieve one aim and purpose”*. While another participant used a piece of land with people farming to represent peace. He explained *“people can only go to farm when there is peace, so this is what peace means to me”*.

From the various responses of the participants, one could deduce that the meaning and concept of peace really does vary from the different participants, but still, there is an underlying want that Maiduguri returns to normalcy (the participants’ former way of life) across all depictions and narrations.

Discussion

The Role of Arts in Cultural Preservation and Healing

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of arts-based approaches in sustaining cultural practices among displaced populations. The workshops provided a space for participants to reconnect with their cultural roots through music and visual arts. As demonstrated by the positive feedback from participants, these activities helped reduce the sense of isolation often experienced in displacement settings and fostered a sense of collective identity.

In line with previous studies (Gergen et al., 2001; O'Donnell, 2012), arts-based interventions proved effective in promoting psychological healing. The act of engaging in music and visual arts allowed participants to externalize their trauma and regain a sense of agency, even in the face of displacement.

Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding through Arts

Beyond individual healing, arts-based approaches facilitated social cohesion within the camp. Music and visual arts workshops brought together individuals from different backgrounds and facilitated dialogue between generations. These interactions are crucial for building a sense of community and shared identity, both of which are essential for long-term peace building (Mernissi, 2018). Furthermore, visual arts provided a platform for participants to reflect on their experiences of violence and express their hopes for the future, thus promoting the culture of peace within the camp.

Challenges in Implementing Arts-Based Approaches

Despite their documented benefits, ABAs face structural and sociocultural barriers in IDP settings due to the cultural diversity composition of the internally displaced. Further, funding constraints remain a primary obstacle, as humanitarian aid often prioritizes immediate physical needs over cultural programs (Marfo & Okyerefo, 2023). Additionally, the lack of trained facilitators limits scalability. In Bakassi Camp, a 2024 evaluation noted that only two trained theater practitioners

were available for over 5,000 displaced persons, resulting in inconsistent programming (Yerima & Bello, 2024). Gender dynamics further complicate participation: conservative norms in Northern Nigeria sometimes restrict women from engaging in public performances, despite their historical roles in oral storytelling (Alubo, 2023). Resistance from camp administrators has also been reported, with some viewing cultural programs as non-essential compared to food and healthcare (UNHCR, 2023). However, advocates argue that neglecting cultural sustainability undermines long-term recovery, as identity loss exacerbates displacement trauma (Eyong, 2022).

Policy Implications: Integrating Arts-Based Approaches (ABAs) into Humanitarian Frameworks

The analysis of Cultural Resilience Theory (Eyong, 2022) underscores the critical need for policy reforms that institutionalize arts-based approaches (ABAs) in all forms of displacement settings. To address such dual imperatives of cultural preservation and psychosocial healing, humanitarian frameworks should adopt some of the following strategic interventions:

1. **Recognize ABAs as Both Cultural Rights and Mental Health Interventions:** Current humanitarian policies are often silo cultural programs and mental health services, which fail to acknowledge their interdependence. Form previously stated evidence from Bakassi Camp, there seems a demonstration that ABAs: Safeguard intangible cultural heritage (e.g., Bori dances, Kanuri embroidery and crafts) as protected rights under UNESCO's 2003 Convention (UNESCO, 2022). These arts-based activities have proven tendencies to reduce PTSD symptoms by 37% among participants in theatre therapy (Mohammed & Shehu, 2023).

Proposed Policy Action:

There should be an amendment of Nigeria's National Policy on IDPs to classify ABAs as dual-purpose interventions under Sections 4.2 (Cultural Rights) and 5.1 (Mental Health). Align with the WHO's Arts and Health Framework (2023), which recognizes arts as non-clinical mental health support.

2. **Training of Trainers amongst IDPs in Art transferability to Ensure Sustainability:** Top-down ABA programs often collapse post-funding due to reliance on external funding and facilitators. A community-led model where IDPs are trained as practitioners offers long-term viability and sustainability mechanisms.

Case Example:

The SHAC Project in Borno trains displaced women to teach traditional weaving, creating income while preserving culture (Bala, 2023).

Proposed Policy Action:

Partner with Nigerian universities (e.g., University of Maiduguri, Collage of Education, Ramat the Train the Trainer model used in Uganda's refugee settlements (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2021).

3. **Allocate Specific Funding Lines for Cultural Psychosocial Hybrid Programs:** only 3% of humanitarian aid in Northeast Nigeria has previously targeted arts programs (UNHCR, 2023), despite its proven efficacy in terms psychosocial support. Hence it is essential that the government dedicates funding to avoid ad-hoc programming: E.g., Bakassi's mural project which lapsed after donor body exit from Borno State (Yerima & Bello, 2024).

Policy Action:

Create a UNHCR/NEMA (National Emergency Management Agency) joint fund for ABA initiatives, modelled after Kenya's Kakuma Art Fund. Mandate 5% earmarking of existing mental health budgets for arts therapies, per South Africa's Arts and Health Policy (2022).

Conclusion

To translate theory into practice, policymakers must:

1. Legislate ABAs as dual cultural-mental health interventions.
2. Invest in IDP-led capacity building to ensure program longevity and sustainability.

3. Ring-fence funding with accountability mechanisms which is rooted in community-based structures.

Further, this study demonstrates that arts-based approaches, such as visual arts, play an important role in sustaining cultural practices among displaced persons in Bakassi Camp. By providing a medium for creative expression, these interventions contribute to psychological healing, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. The artistic session findings suggest that such ABA approaches can be effectively integrated into humanitarian responses that could improve the well-being of displaced populations. Future research should explore the long-term impact of arts-based interventions and their potential for integration into broader peacebuilding and cultural preservation efforts for sustained peace promotion.

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