REPOSITIONING THE NIGERIA WAR MUSEUM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE AND NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Nigeria War Memorial Museum located at Umuahia Abia State and its symbolic importance as a national shrine of honor, homage, and remembrance, and a tool for national unification the study will draw upon literature from museology, history, and related disciplines. This paper mainly examines the war museum as it echoes the civil war experience and its unforgettable effects on Nigerian society, focusing on ethnic, political, and religious dimensions and reconciliation, unification, and peaceful co-existence. The museum is annexed by the popular Ojukwu Bunker which was an administrative engine room of the defunct Republic of Biafra even though it is functionally and aesthetically inadequate when compared to modern contemporary War Memorial Museums around Europe, America, and Asia. This paper aims to provide a structural guide that will assist in promoting and showcasing the national war memorial museums as a tool for the enhancement of national unity. Resources from onsite and online were consulted for the writing of this paper. This paper concludes that the National War Museum should be rehabilitated and fortified as a matter of national benefit. This paper recommends that the Nigeria War Museum be revitalized and promoted as a strategic center for national development.

Keywords: Museum, war, artifacts, Nation building, social change.

Introduction

A War Memorial Museum as a place for information retrieval, dialogue, and inspiration allows visitors to connect to the museum and its content. War memorial museums can offer a balanced view of opposing narratives of the causes and aftermath of war through exhibits, photographs, documents, and audio-visuals. War Memorial Museums can facilitate the

peace process by subliminally infusing a pacifist mentality on visitors through phenomenological design approaches and narratives.

According to Onuora C. (2016), The civil war represented a turning point in the history of Nigeria. In 1965, political turmoil in postcolonial Nigeria resulted in a conflict between the Nigerian state and the secessionist state of Biafra. A political challenge against a perceived Igbo dominance in the affairs of the postcolonial nation led to riots. The civil war that followed lasted from 1967 to 1970 and left in its trail unprecedented hardships and losses of almost one million people from deaths of mostly starved children especially in the eastern region], soldiers, and civilians. Nigeria as a nation experienced intense devastation. However, the Igbo land experienced devastating losses physically and emotionally. In an interview with Mr. Christian Chianumba (1994), posited that he lost his hearing abilities to the sound of machine guns used during the war. There was separation of families, where members of families lost their loved ones, either by death or displacement. Igbo people were given to in-depth trade and businesses as a result of the war these businesses suffered losses and setbacks which in turn affected the economy of Nigeria, thousands of lives were lost at both ends. The war left a dent in the history of Nigeria and as years went by, a need to establish a museum arose.

The National War Museum was established to preserve Nigerian war relics through the ages, especially the Civil War. The War Museum also holds in its collection, materials relevant to the establishment, development, and achievement of the Armed Forces of Nigeria throughout the years. The Museum became a research outfit and an educational and recreational center. The Nigerian War Museum was launched on Jan 15, 1985, by Major General Babatunde

Idiagbon [fss.mini] Chief of Staff. The text on the commemorative plaques unveiled during the launching of the museum reads: 'To the glory of our fatherland and to preserve for posterity, Nigerian war efforts through the ages'. Also, the commemorative plaque unveiled during the commissioning of the museum reads: 'To the glory of God and our fatherland and to consolidate the gains of National unity, this National Museum was commissioned on September 14, 1989, by Lieutenant General Domkat – Yah Bali, the Minister of Defense and Chairman, Joint-Chiefs of Staff. Both plaques have the motto 'That They Did Not Die In Vain' inscribed below the main text.

In 2022 then Nigeria's vice president, Professor Yemi Osinbajo called for a new chapter in the country's journey to nationhood, noting that the new generation must unshackle the grudges of the Biafra war. Osinbajo who took to his Facebook page to make the call after visiting the Biafra War Museum in Umuahia, Abia State, pointed out that Nigerians were now intermarrying and forging alliances in business and politics which according to him, are pointers to a united Nigeria.

The Museum has a collection of objects of traditional and modern warfare. There are also outdoor displays of warships, military aircraft, armored tanks, and "Ogbunigwe" (bombs produced locally by Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War). The National War Museum has the highest collection of Nigerian Civil War weapons that are no longer in use. The weapons contained in the institution are both from the Nigerian Military and the defunct Republic of Biafra. The museum has become a tourist site that attracts hundreds of people daily. They come from within and outside the country for various reasons (1) to see the war artifacts on

display. (2) to relive the period of the war through items on display, while to others, (3) it is for study purposes or simply out of curiosity.

Significance of the National War Museum

A museum is an institution that conserves a collection of artifacts and other objects of artistic, cultural, historical or scientific importance basically for public viewing and learning through exhibits. Similarly, a war museum is a building that houses war artifacts, war-based literature, and war collections of military operations for conservation, exhibition, and learning purposes. War is a difficult topic to interpret in museums owing to their dynamism as such the use of metaphors in relaying the message of the museum will be imperative and expressed via symbolic concepts and apprehended using themes. According to Zeckiye, Cildir and CerenKaradeniz (1992). The main feature distinguishing human beings from other living creatures is the capacity to conceptualize the world and the ability to communicate through these concepts symbolically. A tour through a War Memorial Museum facility elicits various fascinations from different visitors, some visitors seek new knowledge about the war, some seek affirmation of preconceived understandings, and some simply want to revel in the sensory experience of military exhibits both locally or foreign made. Some visitors carry one or another polarized opinion about the wars or the combatants. Bias in favour of one side can continue long after the end of a war, and such biases can lead to museum exhibits that are unbalanced, or even worse, incorrect. (Michael P. Rebman, B.A. 2014). Aside from conserving and exhibiting artefacts, War memorial museums play an important role in educating people on not only the evils of war but also the importance of peace.

The Aim of Establishing the National War Museum

Museums and Galleries are institutions that carry responsibilities to society and have the potential to affect community life positively. Today's museums are shaped by social, economic, and educational changes and how they provide visitors with acculturation, learning, socialization, and rehabilitation opportunities. This is where the underlying psychological effect of museum visits comes into play- the visual and sensory experience of studying objects and imageries takes the visitor on an experiential feel of wartime struggles. Museums of memory in this context are spaces that can catalyze both healing and advocacy just as Olalekan Akinade (2005) asserts that the museums (war museums) of the world must aim at promoting peace.

The National War Museum Umuahia was established for the glory of Nigeria for "preserving for posterity, Nigerian war efforts through the ages" and for "consolidating the gains of National Unity". The establishment of the War Museum is not an attempt to glorify the war effort but an attempt to demonstrate that wars are never solutions to conflicts. The exhibitions in the Museum are meant to promote a society devoid of conflict, tribulation, rancor, and disharmony. Meant to display military history, and war artifacts, and showcase real war efforts and experiences as well as commemorate sacrifices made by fallen heroes. The idea behind this scheme transcends a mere reasoning of conservation but a conscious attempt to answer questions of how the War Memorial Museum should subconsciously solve conflict-based complex social problems.

War Memorial Museum as a Tool for Fostering Peace and Reconciliation in Nigeria.

According to Alapiki, Henry E. (2005). War Museums are designed to create an atmosphere of 'emotion' and with an approach to effectively tell the story of past events. The Nigerian experience of war which broke out in 1967 spanning through to 1970 birthed the National War Museum, located in Ebite-Amafor, Isingwu autonomous community in Umuahia, a site notable for its historical importance as regards the Nigeria- Biafra war. Ebite-Amafor in Igbo language means 'A place of honour' and the site was chosen because it was the bunker housing the famous shortwave radio 'The Voice of Biafra' was transmitted from. As well as the administrative headquarters of the defunct Federal Republic of Biafra after the fall of Enugu in 1967.

The museum gives a mental picture of the war for visitors who did not experience the war and those civilians or veterans, to relive the war experience. The Museum is the end result of one of several efforts by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) to preserve the history of our nation as well as serve as a centre for research and information on warfare in the country. The National War Museum Umuahia was established for the glory of Nigeria and for "preserving for posterity, Nigerian war efforts through the ages" (Shagaya, 1987) and for "consolidating the gains of National Unity." (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, The National War Museum, Umuahia. edited by Dr. Chijioke Onuora). The War Museum was categorized into three galleries: Traditional warfare, Armed forces, and civil war. The exhibits range from crude war weapons, locally

Post-civil war Peacebuilding

Lessons from Nigeria-Biafra and other intra-African conflicts suggest that reconciliation has the potential to sustain national unity and progress in Nigeria but the failure of reconciliation in Nigeria is based on the fact that the state has defined and instituted what it perceived to be the kind of reconciliation suitable to Nigeria's post-war nation-building policies. More importantly, the notion of reconciliation hinged on a problematic federal character, and noninclusiveness, fuels a crisis of citizenship, and national belonging. These are all summed up in the enduring debate known as the National Question, which focuses on how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and regional groupings in Nigeria in a manner that ensures equal rights, privileges, access to power, and national resources. Because the government of the day that is supposed to be the agent of reconciliation is not making the right effort to create stability in the polity and enforcement of true federal character, this suggests that sustainable peace and long-lasting reconciliation, at least under the present conditions, is highly improbable.

Lesson from the Biafra War

According to Adesoji, (2010) Embracing the past is a concrete step towards achieving closure and ensuring that the same mistakes are not repeated. A country like Rwanda has since its own brutal civil war acknowledged and integrated the memory of the war into its national consciousness, ensuring that all her citizens understand the price of war, and know exactly what lead to the sad turn of events. It would be very hard for an individual to manipulate the sentiment around the war for personal gain, as the clarity of history would be too glaring to overlook.

Despite the devastating effects of the war on both sides, atrocities committed towards Igbo ethnic groups since the war continue to form the backbone of the economic and socio-political development in Nigeria, owing to their dexterity and resilience. It is my hope that we reach a point in Nigeria where we can openly discuss the ills in our society, with a mindset of finding sustainable solutions, and further entrenching our nation's unity.

Nigeria's Civil War is instructional material for future generations, and its inclusion as a compulsory part of the national curriculum will help future generations appreciate the sacrifices and diversity that has brought this country so far. It is of no use protecting the memories of our fallen heroes if we do not tell their stories, honestly and completely, and make sure that the unity fought for is further entrenched by carrying every section of the country along.

Unfortunately, the killings could not have been prevented, and the paranoia around power and control prevented us from setting aside our differences to sight a unified vision, however, it would be a disservice to the memories of those affected by the war, dead and many still alive, to not acknowledge and learn about our trials as a nation, to build a safer and more united society for future generations to develop in.

Addressing Rising Tensions in Nigeria

For the overall development of the country, the unity of Nigeria should be taught in our schools. The leadership must create a political, socio-economic, religious, and cultural ambiance of justice, egalitarianism, and fairness. There can be no peace and unity without justice and ethnic groups must have a sense of belonging and shared values. The aftermaths

of the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War (1967-1970) must be squarely addressed. The issue of Reintegration, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation (GOWON'S 3Rs) must be revisited to ensure justice and fairness to the Igbos people. The clauses on Federal Character, Indigenous/Indigeneship Status, Tribe, Religious, Local Government, and State of Origin must be re-warded and re-orientated to propel unity amongst Nigerians. There must be the proper and explicit articulation of Rotative or Rotational Presidency in all Party Manifestoes and in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

According to Chazan, (1997) The minorities or minority ethnic nationalities in the North West, North Central, and North East and in the South East, South West, and South-South must be accorded due constitutional recognition and representation to give a sense of belonging. The National Youth Service Corps objectives must be expanded to include military training, discipline, love of country, patriotism, unity, and oneness of Nigerians and the Nigerian Nation.

A true and sober National Reconciliation Campaign/Colloquium and Dialogue must be organized to re-acculturate our minds, bodies, psyche, and National Lebensraum. The Report of the National Conference must be properly scrutinized and where apt, relevant, and necessary implemented.

The Niger Delta matter must be accorded due recognition through the addressing of the issue of Fiscal Federalism, Derivation Formula, Revenue Allocation, Gas Flaring, Sea Ward Boundary of a Littoral State, Relocation of Oil Multinational Company's Headquarters outside the Niger Delta, Local Content, Petroleum Industry Bill(PIB) and other matters.

Challenges of the National War Museum

One of the goals was to preserve the weapons which were used in this war both the ones made in Nigeria and outside of Nigeria. These represented the technological development at that period. The National War Museum is a reminder that violent conflicts have produced nothing more than destruction and in every crisis, peaceful negotiation is to be explored. However, paucity of funds has been a major obstacle to the preservation of the weapons and armor in the custody of the National War Museum. In an interview with the curator of the National War Museum Mrs Mercy Adiaka, she stated that the museum had access to very little funds, in the sense that when the federal government distributed funds to the War Museum, the majority or most of these funds were allocated to military installations. When people visit the library of the War Museum and intend to make photocopies of the books of their choice, the visitors have to be escorted by an employee outside of the building to make photocopies. This is a result of the lack of electronic machines and devices in creating a standard cyber cafe in the War Museum.

Conclusion

Conclusively the importance of the National War Museum has been carefully examined in this paper and the government of the day will be doing injustice to this national property if it remains neglected and left to dilapidate continuously. Around the world museums are well maintained and conserved, there is the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, which is one of the most famous museums in the world. The Uffizi Gallery is the most visited museum in Italy and

one of the most important in the world. There are also the Museum Island in Berlin and the British Museum in London. These institutions have a wide collection of artifacts from around the world and host millions of visitors on an annual basis. They burnish the image of their cities as well as the countries where they are located. The National War Museum should also be improved to such a standard that will attract tourists from within Nigeria and other countries. The essay concludes that the history of the Biafra War, as represented in the National War Museum Umuahia, is used as a tool by the Nigerian government to exert control over knowledge and promote the government's objectives.

Recommendation

This paper recommends that a deliberate attempt to restore the glory of the museum through adequate financial support both from the government and well-meaning Nigerians to enable the museum to play its role of re-presenting Nigerian history through the ordering of objects and the selection of a particular narrative. The paper also recommends the use of the National War Museum Umuahia as an agent of the Nigerian government to control knowledge. Thus it identifies the role of the museum in shaping collective memories through the selection, ordering, and interpretation of objects.

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Appendices



Plate 1

Title: Front View of the National War Musuem

Source: Nigeria Watch.com

Year: 2023

Location: Umuahia, Abia state Nigeria



Plate 2

Title: Biafra Amoured Car

Source: NigeriaWatch.com

Year: 2023

Location: Umuahia, Abia state Nigeria



Plate 3

Title: V.P Osibanjo at the War Museum

Source: NigeriaWatch.com

Year: 2023

Location: Umuahia, Abia state Nigeria