
IMPLICATIONS OF MORTIFICATION OF MUSEUMS IN NIGERIA: FOCUS ON MUSEUMS IN PORT HARCOURT.

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Abstract

The central focus of this paper was on the total neglect of museums in Nigeria. The study examined the current conditions of three museums in Port Harcourt as a case study. These museums are owned by the federal government, state government, and a private tourist practitioner. Predicated on the nature of the research, the qualitative method was adopted. Participant observation and interviews were employed as primary sources. Purposive sampling was adopted, with three museums selected for study. Staff from the three museums were interviewed, and the data collected were analysed. The secondary sources included textbooks, magazines, journals, periodicals, and internet sources. The population of the study comprised staff from the three museums. Symbolic interactionism was adopted as the theoretical framework of the research. The findings revealed that Nigerians were unable to improve on the colonial collections of cultural heritage and other ethnographic materials, and were yet to appreciate the impact of museums on national development. The paper concluded that religious extremism was a factor that had affected the growth and development of museums in Nigeria. Successive governments in Nigeria ignored museums. The paper recommended the inclusion of museums and cultural heritage in the educational curriculum, visits to museums by school pupils and government officials.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Museum, Mortification, Ethnographic Materials

Introduction

So much blame and criticism have been made against the colonial administration in Nigeria may Africa. This criticism is often articulated by scholars in Africa who argue that Africa's underdevelopment is a direct result of her forceful incorporation into the world's capitalist system. Otonti (2022), argues that this is the root of Africa's underdevelopment. With respect to the subject under consideration, the mortification of museums, it is also plausible to argue that the colonial administration in Nigeria looted cultural heritage in Nigeria worth billions of dollars. According to the Nation Newspaper, the U.K alone returned the Oba cockerel head worth 2.5 million pounds, (The Nation Newspaper February 20th, 2022). This is only from the U.K. The value of Nigerian cultural heritage adorning advanced cities in the world is yet to be properly evaluated. The vexed question is, what has Nigeria done to protect its cultural heritage since independence? How much attention has been placed on the museum?

Chuku (2013) remarked that the past appears to have been forgotten, too fast, too soon, in fact almost in haste. In some areas, the past is completely obliterated. Apart from this, in the course of "development," an alarming rate of destruction of the ecosystem and cultural heritage is noticed. Many valuable aspects of ancient culture have been lost due to either lack of records or lack of preservation. The implication of this is the total neglect of cultural heritage – museums. The nation is therefore denying itself the benefits accruable from the development of museums. The merits of museums are numerous and not limited to the following: they create a national

identity, keep records of the past, store the cultural heritage of the nation, serve as a source of inspiration, entertainment, education, etc. This paper argues that museums are an under-studied area in Nigeria. The neglect of museums in Nigeria by both government and individuals is tantamount to the annihilation of that sector of the national life. This neglect is equivalent to the mortification of museums.

The History of Museums

The word "museum" was coined from "Mouse ion," which meant shrine of the muses. Muses were sacred temples with Greek and Roman origins which referred to nine goddesses who encouraged poetry, music, and other branches of literature. Muses could refer to a person or a spirit that gives the artist, the writer, etc., inspiration, ideas, and desires to create things. (Note how the muses relate to the indigenous interpretation of the creative spirit which propels the artist who may be a carver, dancer, and flutist, and how it also resembles the shrine with all forms of different collectibles and sacred items.

Also, the Dictionary of Leisure, Travel, and Tourism (2008) defines a museum as a building in which a collection of valuable or rare objects and items are seen. It could also be seen or regarded as a convenient repository of antiquated items. According to ICOM (International Council on Museums); a museum is a non-profit permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public which enquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study and enjoyment.

The first example of such a temple was constructed in Alexandria in the 3rd century B.C. as a cultural institution that housed valuable texts, manuscripts, rare books, and sculptures, artistic and religious artefacts. The term museum was first applied in the 16th century to the private collections of portraits of famous men by Pablo Giovio in his palace. The British Museum was founded in 1759. It was a product of enlightenment to offer visitors an educational instructive experience.

The Musei Capitolini, also known as the Capitoline Museum, is likely the oldest museum in the world. Situated in Rome, near the Colosseum, it contains an impressive assortment of classical art and archaeological artefacts. The museum's origins can be traced back to 1471, when Pope Sixtus IV gifted several significant ancient bronzes to the residents of Rome. (Google Arts and Culture, 2024).

In Africa, the origin of traditional museums though different from the colonial regime types, stems from the native doctor's collectibles, sacred sites, forests, groves, huts, mountains, and others and the curators were fathers who oversaw the affairs and also handed over to their sons for the continuity and longevity. Some of the traditional museum sites are centres for initiation, teachings, rituals, and conservation.

Momin and Okppoko (1990) defined museums as institutions, public or private which collect, present, and display objects both natural and cultural to educate or entertain with the provided materials also serving for research purposes and man's heritage. Cultural heritage refers to tangible or intangible objects that are carriers of testimonies and events of the past. This definition has been broadened to include such objects as historic centres, cultural landscapes, or living heritage (ICCRUM newsletter No, 24, September, 1998:13).

Looking at the heritage resources in Nigeria, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments was empowered by Act 242 of 1990 of the laws of the Federation of Nigeria replacing Decree 77 of 1979. It is charged with the responsibility of the maintaining, promoting, and preserving of all heritage materials (artefacts, monuments, sites, and museums). It should be noted that Nigeria has sixty-five declared monuments spread across the six geo-cultural landscapes, out of which two are world heritage sites- Sukur Cultural Landscape in Sukur, Adamawa state, and Oshogbo sacred grove, Oshogbo in Osun state source. Presently, Nigeria has twelve other sites on its UNESCO list namely:

Surname cultural landscape, Ancient Kano City Walls and its associated sites, Gashaka-Gumti National Park, Oke-Idanra Cultural landscape, Oban/Korup Hills, Alok Ikom Stone Monoliths , Niger Delta Mangrove, Ogbunike Caves, Arochukwu Long Juju Slave Route, Old Oyo

National Park , Kiambana/Ningi National park, Sungbo Eredo Earth Works/ Benin City Walls and Moats. In 2011, the commission proposed twenty-four (24) new heritage properties in different geo-cultural regions as scheduled monuments. This was done to encourage better appreciation of both tangible and intangible assets associated with historic sites as evidence of the historical development and systemic civilization of the Nigerian people

The Role of a Museum

It is important to place on record that the idea of the museum as a storehouse of people's history is not alien to Nigerian people. There were institutionalized means of protecting and preserving cultural heritage in the pre-colonial era. Derefaka (2011) notes that in pre-colonial Nigeria, cultural heritage is valued, protected, and preserved in shrines, mausoleums, and groves, as well as by individuals as family property.

The history of museums in Nigeria dates back to 1913, when Lord Lugard in his political memorandum gave the following basis for reservation: Amelioration of the climate, Conservation of dwindling wildlife stock of both plants and animals, Preservation of opportunity for visual quality and aesthetics of land, and Provision of opportunities for recreation

Effective provision of modern museums in Nigeria began with the pioneering works of Kenneth Murray. Murray was an art teacher in the British colonial service and was appointed in 1927 to advise the government on local art. In the process of performing this, Murray collected several artworks from different parts of the country and he recommended that the colonial government should establish museums and proclaim relevant laws to prevent the exportation of Nigerian art. In July 1943, the colonial government in Nigeria established the Nigeria Antiquities Service. Mr. J.H. Braunholtz, a keeper of ethnography of the British Museum was sent to advise the British Government in 1946 on the preservation of Nigeria's cultural resources. In 1947, the Nigeria Colonial Government appointed Mr. B.E.B Fagg a professional archaeologist not only as government archaeologist but also as assistant surveyor to antiquities. Fagg excavated various sites in Jos-Plateau.

In 1953, the Bill Antiquities Ordinance No. 7 was passed. It provided for the creation of the National Department of Antiquities. Other laws and decrees were enacted to preserve and check the sale of antiquities from the post-colonial era. In 1979, Decree No. 77 was promulgated. It dissolved the national antiquities. The National Council for Museums and Monuments was established as a replacement. The commission was designated as a corporate body with the power to generate funds and enter into contracts (Oluwabamide, 2004). The commission has over time established museums in different parts of the country essentially to preserve Nigerian's cultural artefacts. At least there is one museum in each state of the federation.

In an attempt to combat the illicit trade and export of cultural relics abroad, the antiquities law (1961) and Decree No. 4 of 1974 placed a ban on the trade and exportation of antiquities, this was later modified to a centralized export/transfer of ownership control exercised by the Antiquities Commission (Decree No.77 of 1979). To this end, Ekpo (2004) stated that in 1990, there were over 70 registered museum collections in Nigeria, the 62 national museums and monuments under (NCMM) which alone had 30 museum stations in the country, in addition to the 24 university/institutional museums, 20 national/state arts council/private museums and art galleries.

Types of Museums

General purpose museum, Archaeological Museums, Natural history museums, Technology and science museums, Health museums, Zoological museums, War museums, Colonial history museums

Theoretical Framework

The theory of symbolic interactionism was utilized to analyze the purpose and significance of museums. Symbolic interactionism aims to elucidate the meanings individuals attribute to language, symbols, images, objects, events, and more, emphasizing communication and interactions. According to symbolic interactionists, meanings are not fixed entities; rather, they can be created, developed, modified, and altered through the process of interaction. The theory seeks to explain the subjective and meaningful interpretation of human actions and

behaviours (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). In the context of this theory, it becomes evident that the meanings associated with cultural heritage in Nigeria have evolved over time, leading to a lack of emphasis on their protection, preservation, and promotion, ultimately resulting in the neglect and degradation of museums.

Methods

Three museums were selected in Port Harcourt; they are the National Museum Old GRA, Rivers State Museum, Rivers State Secretariat, and Brooklyn Tourist Centre, Rumuosi, East-West Road. The first is owned and operated by the Federal Government of Nigeria, the second by the Rivers State Government, and the last by a foremost tourism practitioner in the state, Chief Mike Amachree, a philanthropist and the operator of Port Harcourt Tourist Centre. The museum is situated at Rumuosi along East/West Road Port Harcourt. Purposive sampling was adopted where the following museums are selected, being the available museums in the state capital.

As a qualitative research, participant observation was adopted. This method is also known as ethnographic research. In this method, a researcher becomes part of the group he is studying. Here he plays two roles; subjective and objective ([https:// www.thoughtco.com.participant](https://www.thoughtco.com.participant)). Its weaknesses notwithstanding, it remains a valid method as it shows how people behave. Chuku (2018) emphasized that it records what people actually do as against opinions. It is easy and less expensive

The three museums were visited separately and the workers were interviewed. During these visits, the visitors to the museums were also observed. This provided an in-depth knowledge of the subject under consideration. With this, it was easy to collect and analyse data. On the whole, ten persons were interviewed, three from each of the museums, and lastly, a Professor of Archeology was interviewed and a specialist in the preservation of artefacts. The Director of the State Museum and two persons were interviewed. At the National Museum, the curator was interviewed with two staff, at the Brooklyn Tourist Centre the manager and two staff were interviewed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The relevance of the museum

The respondents exhibited an in-depth knowledge of the subject. In their views, museums act as a storehouse of a people's heritage and could create national consciousness, to this extent they are relevant. They, however, complained that museums in Nigeria are neglected when compared to other museums, particularly in advanced countries.

The interviews indicated that the federal and state museums suffer from inadequate funding. When probed further, they complained of bureaucratic bottlenecks as factors that continue to negate the development and maintenance of museums. Generally, they were of the opinion that most Nigerians do not know or appreciate the intrinsic value of museums. This also explains the poor patronage recorded by all the museums. The former curator of Port Harcourt National Museum compared patronage in Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Jos and he concluded based on his experience of the three museums that comparatively, Jos and Lagos received more visitors than Port Harcourt.

Responding to the location of museums, the manager of Brooklyn Tourist Centre indicated that the position of their museum is highly accessible as it is situated along East/West road and that location is not a major factor in the neglect of tourism, rather it is the lack of will and or interest among citizens that is affecting the development of museums in the country. However, for the state museum, its location is a major factor that leads to poor patronage. This is so because it is located at the state secretariat which is not easily accessible to people. More so it is an area that is non-residential; at weekends all the public offices in the area are closed.

When asked to comment on the impact of religious intolerance on the development of museums in the state, the interviewees responded that religious extremism undermines cultural heritage. A vivid example was provided, that some directors based on religious biases neglected their duties on the ground that some of the cultural heritage stored in the museums was 'satanic and barbaric'. The example cited was the masks at the State Secretariat Museum. At a point,

they were concealed from the general public view. The curator of the national museum narrated that only a few adults visit the museum. Other groups that visit are students who are researching museums, history, and cultural heritage and secondary school students visit as part of their excursions.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, some inescapable conclusions could be reached, namely; that the level at which Nigerians destroy or neglect cultural heritage may jeopardize the opportunity of future generations to witness the cultural past of Nigeria; level of patronage and visits to museums is an indication that Nigerians are yet to appreciate the intrinsic value of cultural heritage as stored in the museum. Religious intolerance is inimical to the development of museums. Successive governments in Nigeria have not paid attention to the development of museums. This neglect implies that the economic benefits accruable from visits by tourists to the museum would be lost. Museums as store houses of cultural heritage are important agencies and institutions in preserving and educating succeeding generations, and in the absence of museums, these functions would be lacking.

Recommendations

The fact that museums in advanced countries are displaying cultural heritage from Nigeria illustrates the relevance of museums. Meanwhile, the owners of such heritage do not take it seriously. On this note, the government at all levels should prioritize cultural heritage. Also, efforts need to be made to identify, secure, and preserve more cultural heritage that are in the local areas. Such identified objects should be taken to the museums to be preserved. The place of origin, name of donors, etc. should be properly registered.

In view of the fact that the Rivers State Museum is located and locked up in the State Secretariat, it should be relocated to a place where it would be accessible to the public. Cultural heritage should be included in the educational curriculum of primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. This will help in educating the citizenry on the value and virtues of the museum. In the same vein, visits to museums and tourist sites should be part of excursion programmes for both private and government-owned schools.

Public officeholders and civil servants should be encouraged to visit museums, particularly during their annual leave. Finally, the Federal Government should intensify efforts to retrieve Nigerian cultural heritage that is adored by museums in the Western world.

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