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“NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM OF NIGERIA, RECONCILIATION AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE”

Abstract

National War Museum of Nigeria is presented here as a repository of warfare heritage and a podium for culture of peace. The war efforts and peace initiatives of Nigeria are highlighted. The writer asserts, that war is a universal phenomenon but the concomitant effects of war are in most cases paradoxically devastating. This informs the belief that a modicum of peace is better than the least form of fratricide or war. Peace is a delectable commodity while war is a great albatross. The museums of the world must aim at promoting peace.

Introduction

Museum as a dynamic cultural institution renders different services for different ends. Promotion of peace is one of such ends. The museum is a special institution that takes care of the cultural and natural heritage of a country. It sees to the acquisition of objects of cultural value, their restoration, conservation, preservation and exhibition for educational and cultural awareness of the public at large.

National War Museum of Nigeria is located in Umuahia, Abia State. It is one of the 36 National Museums in the country. The idea of war museum was conceived by the then military government in 1977. A military museum located in Zaria, Kaduna State had however been in place since the colonial period. Umuahia was chosen as the location of the National War Museum because it was the final Headquarters of the defunct Republic of “Biafra”, after the fall of Enugu during the Civil War of Nigeria. It is remarkable to note that the presence of immovable war relics and bunkers actually prompted the choice of Umuahia as the site of the National War Museum.

War is anathema and generally considered as ambivalent vis-à-vis the course and aftermath of war. It is a common parlance that if you want peace prepare for war. In this regard, the essence of the National War Museum should be understood in the context of peace. Afigbo (1987) asserts that external trade, peace and war are key aspects of inter group relations. A country under the siege of war is not too far from the edge of the precipice. It is far easier to start a war than to end it. War is repulsive while peace is harmonious.

Conflicts and War in Perspective

Human relationship over the years has experienced conflicts and war because of intolerance, aggression, economic dominance and proselytization (nay, politics of religion). In recent times, discoveries, technological innovation and the desire of one country to overwhelm or lord it over other countries or nations have resulted to wars at the international scene. The use of war in politics and the display of might and wealth negate godliness and it disrupts peace. The choice

of dialogue and judicial procedures are the most humane ways of settling disputes. Egoism arrogance and hatred, on the part of leaders constitute the tool that precipitates war.

The world experienced the First and the Second World War, and thereafter there were other forms of war that could have led to the Third World War but for divine intervention. The Gulf war, the Middle East crisis, and recently the war on terrorism are to say the least needless war if self-restraint had been exercised. It is also relevant to recall the Vietnam War, American/German war that led to the bombing of Berlin. Also Spanish war of 1937; American/Korean war, The American war of Independence and the lingering American/Britain – Iraqi war or imbroglio.

In Africa, Libya, Sudan, Niger Republic, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Nigeria have particularly experienced war of different dimensions and devastations. In recent times Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Trinidad and Tobago witnessed internal destabilization of peace. One fact that is noteworthy is that human existence has from human evolutionary point of view been based on the survival of the fittest. The survival instinct in man makes him to be suspicious and aggressive. This indicates that there is no ideal relationship among nations. Thereby making International relations to waver and swing between peace and war. There is usually some external interference in internal dispute of a nation, thus terminating peace and parading chaos. Generally speaking world history is replete with examples of nations that came out of war in a better and stronger position and particularly more united and peaceful.

In Nigeria, Kingdoms and Empires emerged courtesy of warfare. The British used warfare to colonize Nigeria and to amalgamate her. Nigeria of today came about because the British overpowered the occupants of her land mass. Ibadan, the largest town in West Africa was created as a result of the Yoruba warfare.

The war experience of Nigeria, has contributed to her history and it culminated in a civil strife otherwise known as the Nigerian civil war. The civil war was preceded by some successive events. They included the Kano riots, uprising in Gboko, election crisis in the then western region as well as the attendant “bloody fracas”. Others included the coup of January 15, 1966 and the May 30, 1967 proclamation by Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. In July 1967 the Head of State of Nigeria, General Gowon gave orders for Police Action (Agbi, 1987:153).

The 1967 proclamation by Ojukwu established the Republic of Biafra, an indication that there was going to be secession of the Igbo from Nigeria. Some of causes of the civil war were the impact of colonialism, the impact of the amalgamation of the North and South of Nigeria and the general enthronement of alien culture. The civil war according to Haruna (1987) was a contest by a body of citizens carried on by the force of arm. The actual situation was that there was war between the secessionist Biafra Republic and the Military Government of Nigeria. The civil war started on July 29, 1967 and ended on January 12, 1970. The war was characterized by destruction of properties and the killing of soldiers (on both sides) and many civilians of the Biafra Republic. The war was appraised as a “no victor no vanquished” courtesy of the truce.

The end of war brought about the period of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The unity of Nigeria that was the goal of the military government of Nigeria was achieved and upheld. The truce that was signed at the end of the war brought peace back to Nigeria.

Nigeria as an active member of the United Nations participated in series of efforts that promoted world peace. Nigerian Soldiers participated in the war in: Congo (1960-1963), Lebanon (1978-1987) Chad (1981-1982). The ECOMOG military force also enjoyed the service of Nigerian soldiers in the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia. These peace initiatives suggest that peace is generally preferred to war.

National War Museum, Umuahia as an Agency of Peace

National War Museum of Nigeria was launched on January 15, 1985 and commissioned on September 14, 1989 by the Military Government of Nigeria. The underlining factor in the establishment of the museum was pacifism, which preaches against war. In other words, the museum as a thriving cultural institution serves as a reminder of the effects of war and the need to promote peace and remain united as a people or nation. As a specialized museum, it has uncommon exhibits on display. The underground residential structures (bunkers) that were used by the Biafran Leaders and the propaganda medium (Voice of Biafra) are used as galleries. The display embraces both the development and use of weaponry from the colonial period to the recent past as a way of narrating the history of the Armed Forces. The Armed Forces are the security agencies of Nigeria. They protect Nigeria against hostilities and strife.

In a broad perspective, the National War Museum was established for the purpose of preserving Nigerian war efforts through the ages, the Nigerian civil war inclusive. The activities of the museum embrace research, educational and cultural services. It has facilities for recreation and it serves as a public relations organ for the Armed Forces. The museum is coined as “a permanent and befitting memorial to the war effort of Nigeria” (Shagaya, 1987). The museum broadens the perspective of Nigerian history (Bamaiyi, 1987).

The National War Museum of Nigeria is a complex institution by status. It has a main museum located at Ebite-Amafor Isingwu, the former location of the propaganda organ (Voice of Biafra) of the defunct Republic of Biafra. It also has an annex located at the defunct state house of Biafra – the official residence of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. The two sites have bunkers as prominent features. There are four other monuments under the ambit of the museum.

The main office of the War Museum has three galleries and an open – air museum (exhibitions). The galleries are named as:- Traditional warfare, Armed Forces and Civil war. The exhibits range between the evolutionary of weapons of war and Armed Forces and then the devastating effects of the civil war. The exhibits are in the form of pictures and real artifacts. The open – air museum on the other hand comprises hardware equipment of the Army, Air Force and the Navy. Notable among the outdoor exhibits are armoured cars, troop carriers, heavy artillery, Bazooka anti-tank gun etc. Others are aircraft relics – the Ilyushin, Doniers, Minicon (a small bomber air craft) and the Alluette NAF helicopter remains in which Late Col. Akahan (Chief of Army Staff) died etc. The relics of Naval equipment that consist of assault boats and NNS Bonny (Patrol Craft) are also on display.

The facilities for entertainment include a restaurant located inside a warship relic and a round hut used as museum kitchen. The visitors to the main museum include dignitaries, researchers and students who always come on excursion. Seats are also provided within the open area for visitors to relax. A large auditorium is also available in the museum for the public to use as venue for special occasions such as wedding reception as well as other social and cultural activities. Political programme are not acceptable.

The annex of the National War Museum is located within the GRA in town. The facilities at the annex include children recreation area, galleries (including a bunker where leader of the Biafra Republic lived) and a guesthouse.

The scheduled monuments that are being maintained by the National War Museum are in Arochukwu, Ndi, Okere Abam, Asaga Ohafia and Elu Ohafia. The monuments are maintained so as to serve as a way of carrying the communities along in the activities of the National War Museum and the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (the parent body) as a whole.

Other activities of the War Museum include, antiquities storage facilities and library for research. The Museum receives students and other researchers from time to time. The Education Unit of the Museum carries out educational programme for Children Art club on a weekend basis and outreach educational programmes as occasions demand. The museum works jointly with the cultural agencies of Abia State on matters related with culture and tourism. Local Government Councils also relate favourably well with the museum. The Armed Forces of Nigeria also bring their officers and soldiers to the museum on excursion.

The rallying point of the exhibitions of the National War Museum of Nigeria is a reminder of the ravages caused by war. The need for people to embrace peace and harmony is also stressed. In general terms the exhibitions point at the hazards and other negative effects of war. The Republic of Biafra was compelled by the vagaries of the war to evolve independent technological know-how for the production of war weapons and other equipment. A reactivation (and moderation) of the Biafran wartime technological innovations in the areas of vehicles and aircraft is considered beneficial for a developing country such as Nigeria (Akinade, 2003).

Reconciliation and The Culture of Peace

An estranged relationship does not in any way breed harmony and peace. This informs the global efforts on peace initiatives and reconciliation. Reconciliation facilitates harmonious relationship and brotherliness. The art of reconciliation was adopted by the Military Government of Nigeria after the civil war. The attempt was to make the Igbo who attempted secession to see themselves as Nigerians again. The reconciliatory gesture made possible necessary reconstruction and rehabilitation. The establishment of Federal presence in different parts of Igboland (Southeast of Nigeria) could be seen as part of the efforts made towards developing the ravaged parts of Igboland. The establishment of National War Museum in Umuahia in the post wartime was one form of federal presence.

The culture of peace is a term that portrays some forms of ambiguity to a layman. However, the culture of a people encapsulates their past. Culture on the other hand is multifaceted, multi purpose and dynamic. In a broad perspective, culture is considered an agglomeration of shared patterns that characterize a people and the environment in which they live. Culture summarizes the behavioural activities of man. Different patterns discerned in a people's culture suggest different aspects of their life. There could be patterns of development, upheavals and external interference. The culture of peace enjoyed by a nation or people would engender development and harmonious relationships with neighbours.

In the context of this paper the culture of peace is directed at the overall agreement and efforts geared towards discouraging conflicts, disharmony and war. The focus in a culture of peace is the choice of softer, non-inciting, non-inflammatory methods to resolve conflicting situations and tension. Sports and religious orthodoxy could be seen as promoters of culture of peace. International trade and tourism also promote culture of peace. The use of the cultural and natural resources (i.e. heritage) as a form of entertainment also engenders culture of peace.

In Nigeria, the cultural heritage of the diverse ethnic group is to say the least highly heterogenous. There is diversity in the unity of Nigeria as a nation. However the setting up of National Commission for Museums and Monuments enhanced the pooling of all cultural resources that make one statement of togetherness. There are different National Museums in different states of the federation. The common goal of all the National Museums is to make it clear that all Nigerians are united. The National War Museum, Umuahia aggregates the warfare heritage of Nigeria and warns against fostering of war. It proffers harmony, peace and tranquility in the co-existence of Nigerians. The memory of war should stimulate hatred for war and desire for peace.

Conclusion

The advent of globalization and introduction of government liberal policies have jointly reduced the whole world to a global village. The discomfort of one nation is now becoming a bane to global development. Thinking about the problems of the United State of America, Britain, Iraq and Africa is a way of saying that the whole world is not at rest. Peace has become the only weapon that can foster universal unity and development. Like a pacifist, the author says no to war!!!

Museums are designed to show the brighter side of life by recalling the past and its resources. Today, the clamour for peace is a step in the right direction. It is in this direction that the National War Museum of Nigeria focuses on the war efforts of Nigeria with a view to preaching peace as an alternative to war. Every warring parties or nations are therefore enjoined to embrace reconciliatory moves and walk toward a culture of peace.

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