

The Museum as an Instrument for Engendering Tolerance and Understanding Among Children of Different Tribes in Nigeria

Margaret Okonkwo

Curator, National Museum of Unity, Enugu, Nigeria

Preamble

The policy thrust of the present Federal Government of Nigeria led by His Excellency Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua is structured to consolidate for Nigeria, Africa and the entire black race the ongoing transformation which has located culture and tradition as veritable instruments for social emancipation, economic progress and political unity. The importance of unity and peace as vehicles for the welfare of this black continent is well appreciated by all African countries and formed the basis for the creation, several years ago, of the Organization of African Unity, now known as the African Union.

By all intents and purposes, peace is associated with tolerance and the duo is necessary ingredients for achieving national and global unity. No doubt, the establishment of the United Nations Organization after the Second World War in 1945 was in response to the global quest for peace. Despite its various efforts, global peace has remained elusive – impossible!

Decrying the situation at the turn of the 21st century, the Secretary General of the United Nations said, “We are near the end of a tumultuous century that has witnessed both the best and the worst of human endeavours. The global predicament remains deeply troubling; Peace spreads in one region while genocide rages in another. The mandate of the UN to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war remains as valid and as relevant today as when it was adopted in 1945.”

The principal ingredient for achieving individual, national and global peace is through the evolution of a culture of peace. This means making peace an integral part of our lives. Both peace and war are manufactured in the laboratory of the mind and one could be used to replace the other.

The building of a culture of peace requires education and the museum as an educational institution is a very potent instrument for this. In Nigeria, the Unity Museums are playing very vital roles in engendering peace and tolerance amongst children of different tribes. This will be appreciated shortly.

The Nigeria Scenario

Nigeria, the most populous black nation and the tenth largest country in the world basks in the effulgence of size, heterogeneity and splendour. The country is truly great with a land mass of over 923,000 square kilometres and a population of over 140 million people, which accounts for just about a quarter of all blacks worldwide. The country is pluralistic in many ways:

- over 250 ethnic groups
- multiple religious beliefs
- varied exposure to western education
- different languages and cultures
- varied climatic zones

Attendant to the above-listed factors were mutual distrust, hatred and rivalry based on religious and ethnic differences. Years of bottled-up grievances gave vent to inter-tribal violence, an attempt at secession and subsequently a 30-month war that ended in January 1970. Described then as the bloodiest ever war in Africa, it had a highly devastating effect

and inflicted social, economic and political injuries on the various tribes that make up Nigeria.

A Brief History of the Creation of Nigeria

Following the Berlin Conference of 1885, it became obvious that the protectorates around the Niger area were going to be part of the British Empire.

- With a notification in the *London Gazette* of June 5, 1885, Britain officially took over the administration of this area.
- In 1898, Miss Flora Shaw (later Mrs Lugard), a columnist for the *Times* newspaper of London, suggested that the various ethnic groups around the Niger area be merged and named Nigeria.
- In 1914, Lord Fredrick Lugard, as the Governor General of the Niger area, merged the Northern and Southern protectorates and named the entity Nigeria.
- Even on creation, the unified tribes of the new country as well as the British Government doubted the survival of such a large mass of humanity with several differences in culture, language and religion.
- Today, 95 years after its creation, despite all odds bordering on the aforementioned differences and a protracted civil war, Nigeria has proved cynics wrong and survived intact.

The Rise after the Fall

With the war ended and with the declaration, “No victor, no vanquished,” every Nigerian appreciated the interdependence of the various tribes on one another and the need to avoid a repeat of the war experience. The central government therefore evolved strategies that would ensure peaceful co-existence under the same sovereignty. Among the strategies adopted were:

1. Encouragement of religious tolerance by pointing out and emphasizing those aspects of the various religious teachings that are of mutual interest, ennobling and peace promoting. Christian and Islamic religious studies were introduced as subjects of study at the Secondary School level and institutions of higher learning.
2. Cultural Integration. The central government evolved strategies of encouraging cultural exchanges among the various tribes in Nigeria. These are carried out through the promotion of cultural festivals in the various zones and states of the federation with other tribes participating as guests or contestants. Among the very important festivals that receive national patronage are the Argungu Fishing Festival held in the North-Western region, the Oshun Oshogbo Festival in the South-West, the Durbar Festival in the North-East and the North-West, the Masquerade and New Yam Festivals of the South-East and, more recently, the Eyo Festival of Lagos and the Calabar Christmas Festival. Equally important are the National Festivals of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) organized annually and the Abuja Carnival in the Capital City, held between October and November every year. Through these programmes, the various cultures are displayed in dances, folklore, language and dressing. High-level acculturation takes place as a result of these events.
3. Decentralization of regional powers through the creation of states and local government councils. Immediately before the war, the country was made up of four regions according to the languages spoken and cultural affinities. However, today the country is made up of 36 states and a Capital territory. This has reduced tensions that were based on tribal and cultural affinities.
4. Establishment of the National Youth Service Corps programme. By this programme, young graduates of tertiary institutions are required to serve the nation in any other state other

than their state of origin for a period of one year before being engaged as a staff member in any public or private agency. This programme, which started in 1973, has proved to be very effective in achieving social integration among people of different ethnic backgrounds. Corps members are also encouraged to inter-marry through a special scheme while in the service of their fatherland.

5. Use of the Museum as a social and educational institution. This has proved to be an especially important instrument of engendering peace and tolerance among children, youth, as well as adults of different ethnic groups in Nigeria as will be seen below.

The Museum as an Instrument for Peace and Tolerance

That museums are instruments of engendering peace is of global acceptance. In 2005, Guernica established a museum dedicated to peace. It was called The International Network of Peace Museum. The Bradford Peace Museum also belongs to this category. In Nigeria, the National Museum Lagos (one of the over 33 museums in the country) organized an art competition for handicapped children titled “What Peace Means to Me.” Under the auspices of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, some of these works were shown in an international exhibition of children’s art, “What Peace Means to Me,” in 2006 in the Faculty of Education, University of Victoria, Canada. These programmes made a tremendous impact on the psyche of the children and adults alike.

Museums Providing Lasting Solutions

Of all the programmes and measures adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to stem the tide of tribal differences, the museum as an educational institution has proved to be the most effective – with the use of tangible and intangible heritages harboured in the museums. First, through historical records, it was appreciated that before the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates to form the political entity known as Nigeria in 1914, the various ethnic groups lived and worked in their present geographical locations, interacted with one another and shared some beliefs, attitudes and life styles. They lived in kingdoms and empires with well-defined systems of governance. According to Bishop Michael Ajayi Crowther in his book on the story of Nigeria, “this newly created country contained not just a multiplicity of pagans but also a great number of kingdoms that have evolved complex systems of governance independent of contact with Europe.” These include the great kingdom of Benin, the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu, the kingdom of Ife, the caliphate of Sokoto, the Oyo empire, the politically decentralized Igbo speaking people, and the city states of the Niger-Delta.

Strong trade relationships existed among them and between them and Europe prior to the amalgamation. Recent archaeological discoveries show that some of these kingdoms were in existence as far back as 8,000 years. Various objects of antiquity attest to this fact and they are of great value to the Federal Government.

Special Museums to the Rescue

In order to exploit the opportunity offered by the above historical antecedents in forging national unity, the Federal Government decided to use the objects of antiquity to propagate the message of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. In line with this, four Museums of National Unity – one for each geographical quarter of the country, North-East, North-West, South-East and South-West – were earmarked for development. As their name implies, these museums were specifically designed to engender peace and tolerance among the people and are different in content and programmes from the other thirty museums in Nigeria.

By their contents and their programmes, these museums fit into the notations of Martin Segger (CAM Bulletin, 2007) that “exhibited coins, collections and educational programmes [in Museums] must be examined and critiqued for their role in fostering intercultural tolerance and understanding.” Objects of exhibition in these special museums are carefully selected from diverse ethnic groups to underscore their similarities in use, language and application.

Programmes in the museums are designed to achieve similar goals. Recently, the Museum of National Unity, Enugu, hosted programmes on HIV/AIDS, and skills acquisition for prison inmates (2006) and for widows (2007). There were also the Children and Youth Cultural Carnival (2006), Long Holiday programme (2007), Saturday Arts club, amongst others. The great advantage of these programmes is that the participants were from different cultural, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds. This gave room for the development of friendships and cross-cultural understanding. Another very recent and laudable success recorded by the Museum of National Unity, Enugu, is the hosting of the 2009 New Yam festival celebration in collaboration with the Enugu State Traditional Rulers Council. Through this programme, the Museum has been able to win the confidence of the traditional establishment and will now be able to penetrate the community with the message of unity in diversity.

Amazing Results Recorded

Available Statistics reveal the following data:

- 85% of all museum visitors are children of school age. This presents an opportunity for inculcating tolerance and cross-cultural acceptance and understanding in the youth. The importance of this phenomenon cannot be overemphasized especially in the view of the position of the youth as the leaders of tomorrow.
- Younger generations meet at the museums when they congregate for museum programmes. Friendships develop at such occasions and they tend to last quite long.
- Inter-tribal marriages are increasing geometrically. This shows full acceptance of the different cultural beliefs.
- People travel and live in tribes other than their own for business, work and schooling. This has increased mutual understanding amongst the tribes.
- Higher or greater understanding of the teachings of other religions is being experienced. Some people even change their religious beliefs.

Conclusion

The Nigerian child is a child of circumstance. He/she did not experience the war but inherited the mistrust that followed it. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in appreciating the widening differences amongst the tribes and their implications on the future of the nation, evolved several strategies to create a sense of nationalism in all Nigerians. Of all the strategies initiated, the use of museums as educational institutions have proved to be the most effective. Today, an average Nigerian child feels committed to the course of nationhood and has equal chances of succeeding based on personal qualifications instead of tribal affiliations.

Recommendations

- Museums should be established in as many areas as possible – at least enough to encourage visits by the public without having to travel long distances to reach one. In Nigeria in particular, the federal, state and local governments should come to the rescue.

- More efforts at the creation of awareness among the general public on museums as educational institutions.
- All the arms of the government should as a matter of course support the existing museums, especially financially, so they are able to discharge their functions creditably to the public.
- As recommended as the 3rd GCAM workshop in Malawi in 2005, money should be set aside in the national as well as museum annual budgets for quality programmes especially for children and youth.
- The existing museums as liberal educational institutions should be encouraged in as many ways possible to organize more programmes aimed at bringing the youth together in these institutions for more inter-tribal and inter-religious contacts. It is better to catch them young for them to grow up with better understanding and better tolerance of people from different cultures, religions, ethnic groups, etc.

References

1. *Newsletter* (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria), vol. I, nos. 7–8 (Jan.–June 1995).
2. *NCAC News* (National Council of Arts and Culture, Nigeria), vol. 7, no. 1 (Jan.–March 2008).
3. Abungu, George. Keynote Address. “Museums in Africa. Challenges for the 21st century,” AFRICOM 1st General Assembly and Conference, 29 September–1 October 2003, Nairobi, Kenya.
4. Afigbo, Adiele and Okita S.I.O. *The museum and nation building*. Owerri, Nigeria: New Africa Publishing Co., 1985.
5. Ardouin, Claude. “What models for African Museums? West African Prospects.” In I. Seregeldin and J. Taboroff, eds, *Culture and Development in Africa: Proceedings of an International Conference*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 1993.
6. Ekpo, V.I. Curatorial vision museum workshop for curators, 7–10 February 2006, Enugu, Nigeria.
7. Embu, R. “The museum and community relations.” A paper presented at the Institute of Archaeology and Museum Studies, Jos, Nigeria.
8. ICOM (International Council of Museums). *Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2001.
9. Kachikwu, J.C. “Museums and community relations.” A paper presented to mark the 2003 International Museum Day at the National Museum of Unity, Enugu, Nigeria.
10. Kerri, H.O. *Behind the Scenes in Museums*. Lagos, Nigeria: National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1994.
11. King, L.K. “The social role of museums.” Lecture delivered in 2002 at the Institute of Archaeology and Museum Studies, Jos, Nigeria.
12. Onwuzolum, E.C. “The museum as an agent for socio-economic development.” *Nigerian Heritage*, vol. I, 1992.
13. Segger, Martin. *CAM Bulletin* (Commonwealth Association of Museums), no. 8, February 2007.