

## THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN MUSEUMS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY

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### Abstract

Museums are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and cultural materials, which they hold in trust for the society, it is an important centre where the past and the present cultures of people can be viewed. Some of these objects or antiquities are relics or monument of ancient time, which serve as people's identities and history. They reveal the culture, art, craft, tradition and activities of the people who had once lived but today they are gone, and some of these cultural materials may have been forgotten, damaged, destroyed and decayed. Some are gradual facing extinction as a result of vandalisation, destruction, war and illicit trafficking among others. The implication is that if nothing is done now in the near future there will be no history about the past for the future generation to hear, see and know about such culture, traditions and objects. With the death of the original custodians, without any form of documentation, and the forgotten memory of the living, our cultural contribution to young generation is gradually disappearing with no body ready and willing to tell the story of our past. the existence of museum is to ensure that all cultural materials in the country that are in her custody are protected and preserved from further destruction, decay, damage, and looting among others. The museum exhibits the materials for public viewing. The museum as an institution ensured that reconstruction is done in order to keep history alive. Reconstruction as used in this paper refers to an activity of constructing something again, by fixing, repair, mending and fixture. It also means putting something in working order again. It is against this back drop that this paper seeks to examine the role of Nigerian museum in the reconstruction of history. The paper highlights and discusses the concept of museum, cultural heritage and reconstruction. It also attempts to discuss the types of museums based on their nature and collections.

**Keyword; Museum, Artifacts, Cultural Heritage and Reconstruction**

### Introduction

The word museum is derived from the Greek *mouseion*, meaning "seat of the muses." (Seat of the goddess). In ancient Greece, *mouseions* were temples or sacred places dedicated to the nine goddesses of the fine arts and sciences, which later became repositories for the gifts and offerings of devotees. According to Hirzy (2009), the term *mouseion* was first applied to a state-supported research institute in Alexandria, Egypt, founded by King Ptolemy I around 3rd century BC to foster scientific studies. The museum of Alexandria, as it is now known, was dedicated primarily to learning and attracted the finest scholars in science, philosophy, literature, and art. In order to properly understand the meaning and functions of museums to the public, there is need to understand the definition of a museum. At present, the word museum has been defined in varying ways by different authors and scholars. Britannica Concise Encyclopedia (1975), for instance, states that, a museum is a public institution dedicated to preserving and interpreting the primary tangible evidence of humans and their environment. Some scholars, for example,

Naqui (1981), Afigbo (1982), Okita (1982), Ambrose and Paine (1993), Alexander (1996) and Solana (1986) have also expressed their opinions on what a museum is.

Ambrose and Paine (1993) define museum as the treasure house of the human race that stores memories of the people, their culture, their dreams and their hope. Naqui (1981) maintains that the museum is becoming a combination of treasure house, databank, resource centre and even laboratory. It can be variously used according to the purpose it has been created for. However, the most widely accepted definition of museum is from the International Council of Museum (ICOM). This body is a non-governmental organization made up of museum professionals. It defines museum as, a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment the material evidence of man and his environment (ICOM Code of Ethics for Museum, 2002).

The museums as an institution, tell the story of man the world over and how humanity have survived in its environment over the years. It houses things created by nature and by man, in our modern society. It houses the cultural wealth of the nation in trust for all generations and by its functions and unique position, it has become the cultural conscience of the nation (Ejike, 2013). Every society has artifacts, cultural heritage and events that lend themselves naturally to social experiences and these constitute such society's memory framework. Bitiyong (2013) also supported this view by saying museums keep the most authentic evidence of man's ingenuity. They are cultural store houses, cultural databanks of memories and ingenious creation of our past. They are reference points which help to re-invent and rejuvenate us. This paper therefore, looks at the concepts of artifacts, cultural heritage and reconstruction. The paper discusses museum and cultural heritage and the role of the museum in the reconstruction of history. The paper also highlights on the types of museums in Nigeria based on their nature and collections.

### **Concepts of Artifacts, Cultural Heritage and Reconstruction**

#### **Artifact**

Artifacts are ancient art products of human creation and have remained one of the ways through which history is made tangible. For instance, the history of Greece cannot be complete, without making reference to their ancient artworks like vases, which have helped cultural professionals (like Art Historians, Ethnographers, Anthropologists etcetera) in explaining how the society (Greek) used to function. The Krater vase of the Greek geometrical period, for instance, has concrete evidence of the cultural life of the Greek people in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. On the body of the Krater Vase are highly stylized figures of a motif portraying funeral procession, with a band around the top featuring the meander design associated with early Greek art (Gardner, 1984). In the Roman world, also, statues and reliefs were regularly displayed in, and around public and private buildings. A good example of such building is the Canopus at Hadrian's

Villa in Italy. In ancient Greece, art objects remained part of the public wealth, and were seen and enjoyed not just by scholars but by the entire populace. Greek temples displayed votive offerings, statues, and paintings, which when displayed as a collection, were known as *pinakotheke* (picture gallery).

### **Cultural Heritage**

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or a society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefits of future generation. Cultural heritage includes tangible culture such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art and artifacts. It also includes intangible cultural tradition or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. Intangible culture such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge, and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).

### **Reconstruction**

Reconstruction as used within the context of this paper refers to the activity of constructing something again by fixing, repair, mending and reparation. It is also the act of putting something in working order again. Reconstruction is also the activity of building again something that has been damaged or destroyed.

### **Cultural Heritage and Museum in Nigeria**

Nigeria as a nation is endowed with human, natural and cultural heritage from different parts of the country. This cultural heritage have indeed gained universal recognition globally, among these cultural material are Nok culture, Akwanshi, Calabar, Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Owo, Nupe Tada, Esie stone carving and Benin culture among others. The richness and diversity of Nigerian culture is the manifestation of the socio-cultural differences of the 250 ethnic groups that inhabited the land for ages. These are cultures that have produced cultural materials using different media ranging from wood, clay, copper, bronze, ivory, terracotta, stone and brass. They also produced cultural materials like masquerade, ancestral figures, images of different types of costumes, weapons of war fare, farming implements, household utensil and other objects. The cultural heritage of Nigeria dates back to antiquities when people with advanced and sophisticated knowledge of clay, tin, zinc, ivory and stone used them as medium of expression in Art. Within the cultural context, flourished great civilization which today has helped to explain the depth and excellence of the cultural history of Nigeria. According to Nnakenyi (2003) and Shafi (2013), the Nok terracotta figurines from the Nok culture presented to humanity the technological status of the African people of that age who had mastered the use of iron ore before other societies.

Most of these cultural materials were produced as far back as centuries. Gbadegesin (2008) held the view that terra-cotta and bronze objects from Ife, Nok, Benin, Igbo Ukwu, Copper and bronze objects,

Soapstone figurines from Esie, terracotta figurines from Daima, Eleru and Owo, Ugwelle and Afikpo stone tool complexes and the monoliths (Akwanshi) from Cross Rivers state are the rich artifacts that now placed Nigeria high in the world. Gbadegesin (2008) also adds that material objects of value such as stone tools, bone tools and objects, pottery wares and terracotta, iron tools and adornments, bronze and brass objects, ivory objects and beads are, ethnographic, religious and craft objects which formed what constitute cultural remains of the past.

### **Nigerian Traditional Arts**



**Plate I: Nok Terracotta**



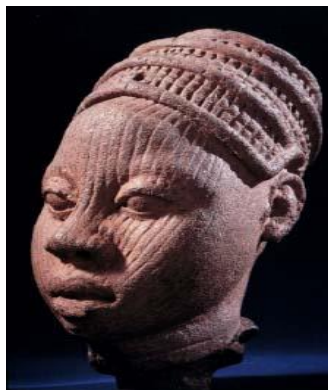
**Plate II: Benin Culture**



**Plate III: Igbo Ukwu**



**Plate IV: Igbo Ukwu**



**Plate V: Ife Culture**



**Plate VI: Akwanshi Art**

Nwagbo (2014) explained that some of these objects or antiquities are relics or monuments of ancient time, which serve as people's identities. For us they are interpretations of material tools collected, and preserved. Nonye (2015) adds that the cultural materials were kept with clan and village head, kings, chiefs, deity priest, aged/older men and women served as repositories and custodians of their oral traditions.

These cultural materials were produced by ancient people who had once lived but today they are no more. They have religion, cultures, tradition, art and crafts, seen in their works. Their art and crafts contained vital information about the life of the makers and users, how these people related to their environment.

Today, they have left behind most of these cultural materials as artifacts and antiquities. Some of these cultural materials may have been forgotten, damaged, destroyed, decay, stolen and some are gradually facing extinction as a result of human forces/activities. Nonye (2015) also observed that colonialism ushered in an era of unrestricted negative human activities such as looting, vandalism, wars, illicit trafficking of cultural objects among others. The period 1900 to 1960 marked the era of colonization in Nigeria. Fasuyi in Nonye (2015) stated that the most remarkable of these destructive human activities on Nigeria cultural heritage occurred during the punitive expedition in 1897, when the British colonial administration attacked the Benin culture area, looted the rich bronze works, and art treasures of the Benin royal palace. It is on the basis of this, that this paper seeks to examine the role of the museums in the reconstruction of history. The museum establishment was to regulate, coordinate, protect and preserve the cultural heritage in Nigeria. Those that were damages were restored and also to stop further destruction, damaged, illicit trafficking, looting and vandalisation of cultural materials. For the museum to achieve this laudable goal there is need to carry out reconstruction in the system by putting things in an orderly manner.

### **What is Reconstruction?**

Reconstruction as used within the context of this paper refers to the activity of constructing something again by fixing, repair, mending and reparation. It is the act of putting something in working order again or something restored, reformed and reorganizes (Hornby, 2015). The establishment of museums in the country was to ensure that all these cultural materials are collected, preserved and protected.

With the death of the original custodians, without any form of documentation, and the forgotten memory of the living, our cultural contribution to young generation is gradually disappearing with no body ready and willing to tell the story of our past. Ezeike (2012) agrees that, our culture and tradition are also gradually facing extinction, that if this continues we will lose tract of our root, culture, tradition and history. The last hope of humanity's history therefore lies with the museums which indeed are the linkage between memory and humanity, between cultural identity and the uniqueness of our rich heritage through the conservation and transmission of the collective memory of our history around the world (Kalu, 2013).

The human value placed on these cultural products (artifacts) due to their historical importance, and the desire to have a safe place for keeping them is what, consequently necessitated the creation of museums. Although museums are primarily Western in origin, the concept behind museums has long been evident in other cultures. In the traditional Ibibio society in Cross River State (Nigeria) for instance, certain masks or art works of high cultural value were given to community elders or other responsible persons in the society for safekeeping. As early as the mid-16th century BC in China also, treasured objects were often deposited in temples and tombs, and the ruling class had treasured collections (Hooper, 1992). In ancient India, paintings were installed in galleries called *Chitrashalas* for the education and enjoyment of the public. All

these can be likened to what is referred to as museum in the modern times. The Nigerian museums are institutions that tell the story of man the world over and how humanity has survived in its environment over the years. It houses things created by nature and by man and in our modern society. It houses the cultural soul of the nation. It holds the cultural wealth of the nation in trust for all generation by its function and unique position. It has become the cultural conscience of the nation. Bodaru (2013) observed that from a more contemporary perspective, a museum is an institution that cares for a collection of artifacts and other objects of scientific, artistic, cultural or historical importance and makes them available for public viewing through exhibitions. Kalu (2013) adds that every society has artifacts, cultural expressions and events that lend themselves naturally to social experiences and these constitutes such society's' memory framework.

### **The Role of the Museums in the Reconstruction of History**

Museums all over the world and Nigeria inclusive have numerous objects in their collections that are basic to the memory of people, communities and the universe. These objects tell the story of a people and give an expression of the people's natural and cultural identity. Expectedly museums serve as witnesses of the past and guardians of humanity's treasures for future generations. By using the past to build the future, museums serve as link between people's past and present in all spheres of life and as a spring board for the future performs the following functions as regard to reconstruction of history:

**Documentation:** - The museums reconstruct history, with the detailed information about the objects in their custody. Any object without accompanying information is valueless to a museum. This is because documentation is one of the role of the museum which involves inventorization of all objects contained in a museum. Documentation helps in the museums stock taking. The museums ensure that objects collected are accompanied with such information as what the object is, where and when it was obtained, how it is in the museum. Okpoko (2011) and Nwagbo et al (2014) believe that, any object without a history or background is supposedly seen as not complete in their context and form. People will be keen to know about the objects from their communities. What they were used for in the ancient times. Agwaral in Okpoko (2011) argued that proper and detailed documentation provides precise, permanent, unchangeable evidence of ownership and this may also discourage thieves, vandalism and smuggling by impeding illicit trade of such material. The museum through her professionals/experts (archaeologists and Ethnographers) carry out reconstruction of Nigerian history by ensuring that they keep information detailed about the objects in their custody. Good documentation helps make information available and also allow for cross-referencing between records. Bodam and Odey (2014) note that documentation refers to all the processes involved in acquiring and keeping accurate records on museum's collections, including factual information

concerning each object in the collections in an orderly and easy to retrieve forms. This also includes the storage of the objects in an organised and secured form.

**Conservation:** As the word implies mean a way by which cultural properties are protected from decay and damage. Edet (1990) and Kerri (1994) view conservation as the technical and scientific activities for the treatment and continuous care of objects in museums as well as monuments. The Nigeria cultural heritage has for long time suffered the problems of deterioration, destruction, and decay. Objects of historical and archaeological values discovered in a state of disrepair must be repaired and those collected need to be properly preserved so as not to lose that first quality given to them by their makers. The museum in an effort to reconstruct Nigerian history ensures that her experts (conservator) who are saddled with this responsibility discharge their duties properly by ensuring that the cultural materials are protected and restored using any method that prove effective in keeping cultural property close to its original condition as long as possible. The conservators ensure that the material evidence of humanity and natural history are preserved, with the aim of prolonging the life span of objects while preventing their natural or accidental decay. This helps to restore the dignity of man in Nigeria, it also helps us to respect and appreciate our various customs and traditions, because our pasts constitute an integral part of our history, which we cannot ignore.

**Exhibition:** A museum can achieved the ideas of reconstruction through exhibition or presentation of its collections to the public. Acquisition of collections without exhibiting them completely negates the existence of museum. It is in carrying out this responsibility that we can assess the success or otherwise of a museum. An exhibit may be defined as showing or displaying of materials (cultural materials) for the purpose of communication with an audience, often the general public. Bodam and Odey (2014) argues that collection are not done just for the sake of collecting, but with a view to educate, enlighten, research, communicate messages and even to entertain. Burcaw (1983) adds that objects in the museums are collected because of their educational potential as specimens. This is an educational activity, aimed at revealing meaning and first-hand experience by illustrative media. Exhibition by the museum gives us the true pictures of the past, thereby bringing memories to life again. Plate VII and plate VIII are good examples of exhibition displayed in museum Gallery



**Plate VII: Cultural Object on Display**

**Source:** <http://hotel.ng/guides/destinations/top-ten-museum-in-Lagos>



**Plate VIII: Cultural Object on Display**

**Source:** <http://hotel.ng/guides/destinations/top-ten-museum-in-Lagos>

It is through exhibition that people or the audience gets to know more about their culture, history, customs and tradition. The objects in the museum teach us to know more about our society, who we are, where we come from and where we are going (Bello, 2013).

**Research:** The museums in the reconstruction of history are involved in detailed and careful investigation of cultural materials with the aim of discovering new facts. All museums have a responsibility to research their collection and make the outcome of such investigation available for others to research. Burcaw (1979) reports that all museums must do research, for each museum has things that no other museums do not have and each museum is unique. Museum research contributes to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and empowerment.

**Education:** In her bid to carryout reconstruction of history the museum involves her professionals and experts who perform various functions of preserving our cultural heritage. Prominent among these professionals are the education officers, who are link between the heritage and the visitors to the museum. An education officer forges link between visitors and museum which encourages learning via a variety of means, including formal/informal education, marketing and publicity (Bello et al, 2014). In the course of preserving the heritage, the education officer liaises with other professionals like archaeologists, curators, ethnographers, conservators and heritage officers to ensure the right thing is one.

The museums collect objects because they believe that these objects are important and evocative to the survival of human civilization worthy of careful study and with powerful educational impact. Whether aesthetic, documentary, or scientific, objects tell much about the universe, nature, the human heritage, and the human condition. Museums preserve their holdings so as to transmit important information to the present generation and posterity (Alexander, 1979). The museum educator carries out his role in three major categories. These are object based (which involves the use of cultural properties to teach or display



for the public to appreciate); activity based (this encompasses the use of cultural heritage objects as catalyst for workshops, seminars, symposia and other teaching activities) and information based (this involves the dissemination of information about cultural heritage and it's important to the community through sensitization, public lecture and publication). Education officers are instrumental to fundamental integration and heritage preservation.

So it has become imperative to examine how education officers have helped, in the reconstructing of history through its programmes and activities for preservation of our cultural heritage. Swift (1999) also observed that museum objects are powerful educational resources, which attract and hold people, attention, motivate, inspire, amuse and amaze. They can stimulate curiosity, imaginative thinking and encourage us to emphasize with the people who made, used and owned them.

### **Types of Museums in Nigeria**

According to Nalah (2003), there are different types of museums in Nigeria. They are established based on the archaeological, monumental, ethnographic and cultural discoveries of the objects in the area. In this way, the museums are normally created to house a collection of important selected objects in its field. There are five types of museums in Nigeria namely: visual/fine arts museum, ethnographic museums, military and war museums, natural history and science museums, and open air museum.

**Visual/Fine Arts Museums:** An art museum, is a building for the collection, preservation and exhibition of works of art, which could be viewed. It is concerned with the conservation of antiquities of the nation, such as sculptures, ceramics, paintings, furniture, metalwork's, jewelries and textiles. Olorukooba (1991) reports that, the establishment of museums of fine arts, in Europe and America, dates back to the second century BC. The author states that, museums were built according to the existing styles of paintings and sculpture of different periods. The buildings were divided into various sections such as Modern Art, Roman Art. Art museums play a leading role in providing information about museum study. They reflect the development and trends in modern art. Plates IX and X show cases the Esie Museum and the collection of soapstone figures in the museum.



**Plate IX: Esie Museum**

**Source:** <http://hotel.ng/guides/destinations/top-ten-museum-in-Lagos>



**Plate X: Collection Soap stone Images, Esie Museum**

**Source:** <http://hotel.ng/guides/destinations/top-ten-museum-in-Lagos>

In the fine arts museum, life size forms are sculpted in the round and bas-relief of animal or human figures mainly to decorate palaces, residence, important streets or buildings. Ornamental objects and jewelries are found in this type of museum. Examples of such are rings, earring, necklaces, bracelets and armlets. Others are paintings, photographs and illustrations. Examples of Visual Arts museum are located at Jos, Yola, Makurdi, Lagos, Sokoto, Esie, Benin, Ife, Kano, Kaduna etc.

**Ethnography Museum:** The ethnography museum deals with the scientific study of different races of people. It contains different types of works of art collected from different parts of the country. For example, in the British museum, the popular African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) mask is found in the collections of African race and culture. Ethnography museums are found in Nsukka, Enugu State and Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Oyo State. Again, the Kaduna museum is not an ethnographic museum, but it has an ethnographic section. Consequently, the research will examine the nature of its ethnographic collections for an exposition of such collections. Plates XI and XII are good examples of ethnographic materials on display.



**Plate XI and XII: Museum Gallery Exhibiting Material Culture of Man (Artifacts)**

**Source:** <http://hotel.ng/guides/destinations/top-ten-museum-in-Lagos>



**Plate XIII and XIV: Warship and Air force Air Craft at National War Museum Umuahia**  
Source: [http://kokofeed.com/photos-5-amazing Nigeria-Museum-excuse.vist.it](http://kokofeed.com/photos-5-amazing-Nigeria-Museum-excuse.vist.it)

**Military and War Museums:** Military museums specialize in military histories. They are often organized from a national point of view, where a museum in a country displays weapons of warfare and remains of conflicts which Nigeria took part. They display weapons, other military equipment, uniforms, wartime's propaganda and exhibits on civilian life during wartimes, and decorations, among others. In Nigeria, war museum can be found in Zaria army depot and Umuahia. Umuahia town played an important role as the military headquarters of the defunct Biafran Republic. The National War Museum was sited or chosen because that was where the bunker housing the famous voice of Biafra was located. The war museum is an open-air complex where relics of the 30-months Nigerian civil war are on display (<https://ambeels.wordpress.com/national.war.museum>). The war museum is symbolic in many respects. To all Nigerians and foreigners alike, it is a grim reminder of the evils of war. Plate XIII and XIV show a warship and air craft in Umuahia museum that were used during the Biafra civil war in the 60s.

The Kaduna museum established to house artifacts of northern region, pre-supposes that traditional war items of the north should ideally be found there.

**Natural History and Science Museum:** Museums of natural history and natural science exhibit works of the natural world. The focus is on nature and culture. This type of museum deals with the collection of plants, animals and minerals. The natural history and science museums are found mainly in institutions of higher learning, where students learn the natural history and sciences of animal, human beings and plants. Notable museums of this type include Obafemi Awolowo University Natural History Museum, Ife; Bayero University Biological Science Museum, Kano; and Usman Danfodio University Biological Science Museum, Sokoto (Nalah, 2003).

**Open Air Museums:** Open air museums collect and re-erect old buildings at large outdoor sites, usually in setting of re-created landscapes of the past. They consist of historic buildings which are preserved as part of the exhibition as well as monuments. For example, the bright of Benin in Jos museum, Gidan Makama,

Kano. Open air museum are kinds of museum that exist outside a building in an open air space. The objects are either housed in an open environment for conservation or allowed to be in their natural environment with all its interesting features. Such collections contain curious, interesting or antiquated objects reconstructed in a place for exhibition. According to Nalah, aspects of the open air museums are left in the habitats of living organisms, and their relationship to one another is what makes the museum interesting.

Olorukooba (1991) reports that, the first open-air museum was established in Stockholm, Sweden in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was rebuilt to include workshops and farm houses at about 1893. He further states that, there are about one hundred open-air museums today, like the one in Jos, Plateau state. This kind of museum contains collections of curious objects or items brought from anywhere. These include old farm houses, stables, traditional equipment and so on. It is also referred to as museums of traditional architecture. Objects here are complete houses reconstructed in a place or form. He further states that, there are three types of open-air museum they are historic site/historic building, miscellanea or mixed museum, and ecological museums.

### **Conclusion**

The Nigerian museums play a key role in the reconstruction of history through professionals and experts in the museum. Before the existence of museums in Nigeria or colonial era, collection of cultural objects existed in different ways. Nonye (2015) notes that cultural objects were kept with clan, village head, kings, chiefs, deity, priest, aged/older men and women served as repositories and custodians of their oral traditions. This period ushered in an era of unrestricted negative human activities such as looting, vandalism, wars, illicit trafficking of cultural objects among others. But museums were established to transform and reconstruct the Nigerian cultural environment. Museum by its nature keeps custody of all cultural heritage in the country. They ensure that cultural materials are collected, preserved and later exhibited to the Nigerian populace for viewing. This is done so that the cultural materials do not disappear and keep culture, history and tradition of the past alive.

### **Recommendation**

The government and private organisations should as a matter of urgency assist towards the development and preservation of our cultural heritage by supporting the museum, the National Council for Arts and Culture and the Centre for Black and African Studies among others. A committee of cultural sector professionals and that of education be set up to work out modality for a strong policy that will instil teaching and practice of our cultural values in schools and places of work. Government should provide adequate management policy for art and cultural agencies and funds should be provided.

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