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CULTISM AND VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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University of Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Youth violence on campuses of tertiary institutions has increasingly become a worrisome scenario for University administrators, governments and members of the civil society. Our tertiary institutions are subsets of the various macro societies and they are a reflection of society's increasing use of violent methodologies to resolve conflict frustrations and conflict situations.

Nigeria, with over one hundred and fifty tertiary institutions, has witnessed unprecedented violent behaviours occasioned by students' involvement in campus cultism. Peace on campus has been shattered due to this development of violent behaviour. Blood-letting arising from either murder or manslaughter has become pervasive. Over 33 students' lives were lost between 1986-1996 while more than 7 members of the academic staff were also killed. This paper discusses: (a) the beginning of cultism in tertiary institutions in Nigeria with particular reference to the traditional societies which prepared the way for campus cultism, (b) the reasons for the emergence of fatal cultism on campus, (c) various factors that encouraged students to join cults, (d) names of violent cult groups and their members, (e) procedure for initiation and recruitment into cultism, and (f) factors that have sustained cultism in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

The paper concludes with the effects of cultism on tertiary education and proffers ways of combating the menace that has threatened the administration of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Introduction and Definition

Webster's dictionary defines a cult as a "devotion to a person or thing or a creed or sect." A cult in Nigerian parlance is defined by Odiki (1997) as "a group or society of young persons or people bound together by an oath of allegiance to protect and promote clandestine or secret objectives".

While the definition given by Odiki may be considered valid to some extent, it also to a reasonable extent invalidates itself by the assertion that it is a group of young persons since groups of older persons have been found to form cults or secret societies in our traditional African setting in which their objectives are only known to members. By implication, cultism may originate from groups of youthful persons or elderly persons or a combination of the two.

Akanni (1999) defined the act of cultism as a set of practices, belief system or idea whose essence is known to the inner members and excessively admired and defended even to the point of laying down one's life. The various forms of covenants and oaths of allegiance sworn to by members forms the background to the doggedness and strong conviction demonstrated by members which reinforce the importance of cult and awe for the group especially among non-members.

Violent behaviours occasioned by cultism are distinct from those that arise out of organised student demonstrations, the latter being carried out by organised student union bodies in which case their grievances are known and often times in reaction against the administrative structures, political, and economic policies. Violent behaviour as a result of cultism is usually carried out by faceless human personalities within the student group.

Cultism in Nigerian Traditional Society: A Precursor to Cultism on Campus

Cultism in Nigeria's tertiary institutions was predated by the involvement of parents in occultic activities in the traditional society. Babarinde (1998) identified Ogboni cult, which previously existed as Imole Society in Ile-Ife. Gelede society, Oro society and Agemo are some of cult groups in south western Nigeria. Others according to Akanni (1996) are Oboni society in Cross River state, Odumu masquerade in Okrika and Mamma society among the Nupe in Northern Nigeria. Babarinde (1998) contended that some of these cults were useful to society as they helped to defend communities against external aggression in the olden days and that they were not destructive. It is these cult groups that have now been copied by our youths on campus which have culminated into the drift to violence experienced on the campuses.

The Beginning of Cults in Nigerian Campuses

The origin of Cultism in Nigerian Universities is traceable to personalities who later made marks in their careers and professions. Cultism in universities commenced at the Premier University between the 1953 and 1954 academic session. 1986 Nobel Laureate Prize Winner in Literature, Professor Wole Soyinka, is said to be a co-founder of the first cult group in a Nigerian tertiary institution. The group was known as "Pyrate Confraternity". Awe (1997) reported that the foundations of what now became violent cultism was founded by seven idealistic young students in the 1953/54 session at Tedar Hall, University of Ibadan. The names of the founders include Nat Oyelola, Pius Oleghe, Frank Imouchuede, Ralph Opara, Muyiwa Awe (later Emeritus Professor of Physics at University of Ibadan) and Wole Soyinka (later Professor and Nobel Laureate).

The aims and objectives of "Pyrate Confraternity" (PC) also known under the name of "Association of Seadogs" were: to abolish convention, revive the age of chivalry and end tribalism and elitism.

Another cult group, known as "Eiye" came into being in the early 1960's.

Eiye did not seem to have any clear-cut objectives and this might be the reason why the group started to drift into activities such as violence, killing, raping and involvement in other dastardly acts occurring on campuses. Even the Pyrate group which had claimed to have aims and objectives which were positive became overshadowed by the Eiye group since their objectives became linked to the negative situations and occurrences by the other cult groups of the times whose main objectives seemed to be centred around violent assaults and atrocities against fellow students.

Awe (1999) explained that the Pyrate Confraternity was meant for the cleanest, brightest and the politically conscious and that they never held meetings in the night. Contestable is the claim that Pyrate was not founded on the basis of violence. There are two facts that seem to invalidate this claim. These are:

- (i) The symbol of human skull, sword and the use of the name "Seadog".
- (ii) The slogan of "blood for blood; measure for measure and no friend no foe".

However; the Pyrate incidentally happens to be one of the clubs and societies registered under social clubs in Ogun State University (Fajola, 1989:63). What is unknown now is whether it is still a recognised club today. The Pyrate Confraternity, was benned in 1988 and has since disassociated itself from campus membership even though student membership still exists in differently named cult groups. Fatal cultism has emerged due to doctrinal difference, inability to meet the standard of pioneer cult groups and proscription of Student Unions (Awe, 1999).

The problem of cultism became so mindboggling to all the Nigerian States that the government was persuaded to release funds for tertiary institutions administration to eradicate the ugly situation after the dastardly murder of five students at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria in 1999. In what seemed regrettable about Government funding to stop cultism, Borishade Babalola the Minister of Education in Nigeria at the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning meeting in Durban, South Africa had this to say:

I think giving universities money (to fight cultism) was really a decision that probably ought not to be taken ... If cultism is secret, and you want somebody to contain some secret activities and then you put money on that, you cannot begin to ask universities to explain how such monies were spent. It is at the discretion of the Vice Chancellors. We saw examples of people who came out and declared that they had abandoned cultism. There were lot of dramatic expressions of cultism being wiped out in the Universities. But we know as we have found out that these did not reflect the reality on the ground and that cultism has in fact not been wiped out as has been claimed. So the efficiency of that technique has been proved to be very, very low. Therefore, I have not been impressed by the idea of putting money to fight cultism in schools (*The Guardian* 1st August, 2002)

Factors that Encouraged Students to Join Cults in Nigerian Campuses.

There are quite a lot of factors that encouraged college students in Nigeria to belong to cult groups.

Fashina (1999) gave five factors from a psychoanalytical point of view, which includes the following:

- (a) Personality accounts which have to do with the malfunctioning of the personality of the students involved.

- (b) Psycho-emotional accounts that arose out of the need to mitigate extreme feelings that otherwise might be borne.
- (c) Curiosity which is usually associated with explorative attitude of young minds.
- (d) Casual consequence of political repression.
- (e) The leadership structure of force and coerciveness.

The long years of military rule which totalled twenty nine years out of forty two years of independence took democratic virtues into the cooler and brought about resurrections of the kingdom of force and obey. This oppression is also believed to have brought about faceless agitators and cynical operators in the name of campus cults who in response to the oppressive nature of the society, also organised themselves to oppress the oppressed in their own enclave and territories i.e. campus.

Ogon (1997) an Assistant superintendent of police however gave many other factors that encourage students to belong to violent cult groups in Nigeria which were based on his own experiences in the force. These factors include class structure, economic situation, poor parental upbringing, ignorance of the deleterious effect of being involved in cultism, peer group pressure and indoctrination by films on the screen. A lot of foreign films, which show violent behaviours, have found their way into Nigeria's film industry. According to Ogon (1997), "Our students want to act out the violent activities they watch on television". Other factors given by Ogon (1997) included wrong value system; consumption of psychopathic substances, inherited violent traits, revenge emotions, truancy and drunkenness.

All the above listed were found to have contributed to the incidence of cultism in Nigeria.

Violent Cult Groups in Existence in Nigeria's Tertiary Institutions

Since the emergence of cult in the 1953/54 academic session at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the number of existing cult groups has increased immensely. Many of them are breakaway groups from parent cult groups.

It is estimated that there are about 30 cult groups, which spread across the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Oyebade (1999) reported that the situation has witnessed unfortunate dimension as it has percolated into Primary and Secondary Schools. In Ogun, Ondo, Abia and Edo States, Secondary School Students have been rounded up on police tip-off while they were busy initiating new members into cults. Akanni (1999) gave a list of about twenty one cult groups in existence where he classified some as belonging to secondary schools. The cult groups are listed below:

Tertiary institutions male cult groups

- | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Pirate Confraternity | 2. Buccaneers | 3. Eije |
| 4. Black Axe | 5. Black Beret | 6. Vikings |
| 7. Barracudas | 8. Black Cat | 9. Trojan Horse |
| 10. Green Beret | 11. Musketeers | 12. Mafia |
| 13. Twelve Disciple | | |

Tertiary institutions female cult group

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 14. Daughters of Jezebel | 15. Damsels | 16. Dames |
| 17. Amazons | | |

Secondary School – Male cult groups

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 18. Mgba Mgba Brothers | 19. Black Bishop (Baptist College, Port Harcourt) |
| 20. Black Avengers | 21. Black Crab |

Secondary School – Girls cult groups

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 22. Black Angels | 23. Caribbean Queens. |
|------------------|-----------------------|

Others not listed by Akanni (1999) includes:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 24. Victor Charlie Boys Group | 25. KKK boys. | 26. Manbo Brothers |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|

Initiation and Recruitment into Cults

Every new session, cult groups go out like evangelists of religious groups spreading their own "gospel" and convincing new students of fake security and promising to help them pass exams without effort. The targets of cult recruitment drive, according to Ogunye (1997), are wealthy students, students with macho physique, children of university staff and children of military and police officers.

They even go to the extent of deceiving students into initiation under the guise of invitation to night parties which turn out to be initiation ceremonies. As a result, some join by default.

Akanni (1999), explained that the initiation involves drinking of concoctions mixed with blood, incantations and beating, licking of blood and test of physical capability.

Also included is the oath of secrecy of activities, some intending cultists do not even survive initiation as some of them die while undergoing strenuous strength tests and the oath of secrecy is such that those who die at initiation grounds are often buried without the knowledge of the outside world. Akanni (1999) reported that Sunny Iweba died at Rivers State University of Science and Technology after a harrowing initiation experience.

Factors that Sustained Cultism in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria.

Some of the factors that might have sustained cultism include, according to Fashina (1999), Babarinde (1999) CDHR report (1995) and Adeola (1997) militarisation and institutional support:

- 1. Militarisation:** Long years of military rule, according to Fashina (1999) created violent and oppressive governments against civil populace thus breeding violent cultism. The children in our universities were born during the period of massive military rule. The arms used against the members of the civil populace in trying to quench the call for democratic governance have found their way into the hands of the youth and as such are now being used to oppress others in their own enclaves i.e. tertiary institutions. The

trials of retired military officers and the confessions of a killer squad have tended to suggest the involvement of Government Agents in the murder of notable Nigerians between 1993 and 1998 when late General Sanni Abacha held sway as Head of State. According to Ogunye (1999) the larger Nigerian society witnessed twenty two bomb blasts in the 1990s alone and the death of notable personalities. A lot of people like Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, fled into exile during the period. The Democratic Governance installed on May 29, 1999 actually brought into the open the involvement of persons in previous governments who were involved in the act of violence against individuals and groups in Nigeria through the Oputa Panel (a national reconciliation committee) set up to investigate complaints of individuals and groups during the regime of the past Governments. Revelations from the Oputa Report (2002) really confirmed those violent actions and the findings revealed purported state-sponsored terrorism.

2. **Institutional Support:** This implies that some form of support is being received by cultist groups from administration of some tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The fact that notable citizens were founders of the first cult group also presupposes that some members have found their way into administrative and teaching positions in the University. Research reports such as Adeola (1997) and Babarinde (1999) affirmed that leadership of some universities utilise cult groups to checkmate aggressive Student Union Leadership and other cult groups. It is believed that some activities are difficult to perpetrate if not condoned by the leadership structure. Since the demise of military government in 1999, bomb blasts have stopped and cult clashes resulting in deaths have also become drastically reduced in our institutions.

Other factors identified by the author are listed below:

3. **Fraught Admission Processes:** Admission processes, which initially was merit oriented has become fraught with a lot of irregularities. Tertiary institutions have allowed terrible elements into universities, polytechnic and colleges of education and these students are both professional cultist and professional students who having been expelled in one institution and then gladly re-enroll into some other institutions and continue their dastardly acts of occultic escapades.

- 4 **Involvement of Children of the rich, the powerful, the ruling class or children of Tertiary Institution Staff:** Research reports have shown that many of the cultists are children of influential people who could have access to their parents guns and ammunitions since it is unlawful to possess arms without license in Nigeria. These children of wealthy individuals after their involvement get bailed and released due to their parents' connections and links. The fact that some of the students involved are children of University staff whose cases may be swept under the carpet due to parental influence coupled with the fact that suspected persons escape being punished has encouraged the sustenance of violent behaviours on campuses.
- 5 **Government Lip service to Cultism:** The law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is clear on various criminal activities. Government usually invokes decree 47 of 1989 by expelling students when negative student union actions are carried out by expressive and aggressive Student Union activists, but cult members who maim, rape and kill often escape. The Government is perceived not to be very serious at all. Cases of cultism resulting in death, maiming or whatever are expected to be treated under appropriate criminal codes. Unfortunately, very few have passed through the process. The new democratic government spoke tough and gave University Vice Chancellors, Polytechnic Rectors and Provosts of Colleges of Education a three month mandate to eradicate cultism in 1999 while periods of grace were given to those who may have wanted to repent.
- 6 **Exposure of Students to Negative Movies, Television Pornography and Internet:** Nigerian students have become more exposed to violent movies on television. The existence of gangsterism has been copied from television movie series, which often provide violence as an antidote to problems. The advent of Internet technology has not helped matters either.

Jerry Johnson in his book *It is Killing Our Children* :

Today's kids are learning their attitudes and values more from TV and movies than from anywhere else. It is estimated that in United States, by the time a youngster gets out of high school he has watched more than 20,000 hours of TV, witnessed 15,000 murders and watched 100,000 alcohol related commercials. They convey the message that drinking is fun, smoking

is glamorous and drugs are good. Soap opera is glamorous when it shows premarital and extra marital sex.

USA Crime Victims and Research Center report (1992) showed that rape is committed in America every 46 seconds and 86% of rapists admit to use of pornography scenes when committing sex crime. In Nigeria, during occultic escapades, rapes are also committed and continued exposure of students to these dangerous films has influenced the students' attitudes.

7. **Ban on Students Union at one time or the other:** The various bans often placed on the freedom of students to associate with each other by various University authorities has often made students end up taking on occultic activities to express themselves. Longe (1991) reported that the ban on Students Union Government has contributed to the increase in occultic activities.

Effects of Cultism on the Tertiary Institutions

Cultism and violent acts have very great effects on tertiary institutions. The violent acts are even threatening the three cardinal objectives of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria which are teaching, research and community service. Some of the effects are enumerated below:

- (i) Students often suffer from psychosocial maladjustment resulting from occultic escapades most especially when ladies are raped in their hostels.
- (ii) Undue closure of tertiary institutions act as sequel to cult clashes. (The Lagos State University was closed down in April 2002 as a result of the broad day-light murder of the President of the institution's Student Union Government right inside the University campus by suspected cultists)
- (iii) Unnecessary waste of lives of future nation builders who have the bravery to challenge government and social institutions. (The cult strike at the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria in July 2000 led to the killing of the Student Union Secretary General and the murder of a teenage medical student). Akanni (1999) reported that 33 students died

from cult clashes between 1986 and 1996 alone and around one hundred and forty five students were expelled for cult related offences between the same period. These statistics seems an underestimation of the actual deaths and expulsion as his list does not involve sixty nine students expelled at Ogun State University, Ago-Iwoye (now Olabisi Onabanjo University), in July 1999. (Some staff of tertiary institutions totalling seven were also murdered, one of which was a Professor of University of Ilorin, Nigeria and Registrar of a State University. Two students of University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria were killed in their hostels on the 27th June 2002. Also, a Philippines Professor was shot dead by unknown gunmen suspected to be students in Manilla. She was reported to have received threat letters from a student who is in year three in the Agricultural Economics Department (AIT News Report, 27th June 2002).

- (iv) Living in fear on the campuses of tertiary institutions. These have made students to live fearfully and some even go about with weapons in order to defend themselves against attack.
- (v) Impossible for students to concentrate in their studies which is their primary duty on campus due to unpeaceful and threatening environment.

Recommendations for Combating Cultism

Solving the problem of cultism is not the exclusive reserve of the government. It involves the whole aspect of the civil society; religious group, tertiary institution authority, the security agencies, judiciary, the students and even the legislators.

1. **Role of Students:** Criminals live within the society, so also cultists are students who live in the midst of students. Since students are allowed to associate and democratically elect their leaders, they should put in place credible and responsive leadership that will checkmate occultic and violent activities. This can be done by increasing democratic values on campuses which will reduce participation in secret societies.
2. **Better Participation in Sports:** Tertiary institutions should create better opportunity for the undergraduates to use their free time by improving

sporting facilities. The idleness of these active and youthful students during their free hours turn them to devils' workshop. Some "glorified secondary" schools that have emerged as tertiary institutions in Nigeria lack facilities for sporting and thus students use the devilish fun in occultic escapades to replace the fun inherent in sporting activities.

3. **Role of Parents:** Some parents themselves have been found to belong to traditional cults and some lecturers who are cultists represent bad models for the younger generation. Parents are expected to be good role models and are to give their wards better training so that they see occultic activities as bad behaviours.
4. **Role of Religious Groups:** The religious groups especially the churches in Nigeria have taken some responsibilities upon them to eradicate cultism. The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria has carried the crusade to campuses and many students have turned away from evil and occultic practices. Students were seen publicly denouncing cultism during the programmes organised by the Church on Nigerian campuses. Other churches and religious groups too can join to educate and turn students from violence to peace.
5. **Role of Legislators, Security Agents and Judiciary:** The legislators should sponsor bills that will specify the mode of punishment to be meted out to cultist in our institutions. This will empower the security agents to make arrest and prosecute while the judiciary adjudicate without delay
6. **Introduction of Lectures and Seminars:** Regular academic lectures and seminars should be organised for students to inculcate into them greater value for human life. This will reduce occultic activities in tertiary institutions. Ex-cultists in the societies who have found their past involvement as a mistake and misapplication of their time, wisdom and intellect should be allowed to teach the students about the dangers inherent in involvement in secret societies that breed violent situations.
7. **Proactive Solution:-** The effort to eradicate cultism must be a continuous one i.e. rather proactive than retroactive. We should not wait for lives to be lost before we descend on occultic activities. New students are entering

every year, the campaign against cultism should become a regular feature of the school/institutions programme. The reduction in occultic activities should not be mistaken as eradication since they might have gone underground to oil their machines.

Conclusion

Fatal cultism has resulted in tragic circumstances in our country whenever these violent actions surface in our tertiary institutions. This dimension of violence is distinct from student negative activism as that one is anchored by organised student union body in revolt against institutional and conventional political or economic policies. Cultism has been a secret affair. The perpetrators and sponsors are usually faceless human personalities who carry out violent acts against representatives of institutional authorities and fellow student groups. Their activities have resulted into deaths of staff and students while teaching and learning have also been disrupted. At the Kwara State Polytechnic in December 2001 lecturers had to flee for their lives and resolved not to come to work until issues of cultism is stemmed down for their safety and security of their lives could no longer be guaranteed. However in general terms, cultism has been reduced as various organisations and Non-conventional organisations including churches have increased their campaign against such activities. With recognition and the use of the methods proposed in this write up, cultism would be drastically reduced.

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