

Cultism menace: A case study of Nigerian tertiary institutions

Christian Ezenwa Chuks Ogwudile

Abstract

Cultism is a major vice which is common in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria today. The study examines menace of secret cults in the Nigerian higher education institutions and proffers some solutions for curbing this monster. Cultism itself according to history, started for a good cause but over time, its purpose and modus operandi has changed. The existence of cultism and cults in our universities poses continuous threat to life and peaceful co-existence. In spite of drastic measures and laws against membership of campus cults, cultism continues to assume a major social menace and a serious obstacle to peace and harmony in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Cultism is defined as the practices or activities of a group of people with one common spiritual, religious or philosophical belief. Whereas cult groups and activities were purpose oriented at the initial stage; they have become destructive and violent in the recent past. The menace has attracted the concern of stakeholders within and outside the educational institutions. Its increasing negative impacts on education evidently manifest in the disruption of academic activities, destruction of school infrastructural facilities and loss of lives calls for investigation and drastic measures to eradicate cultism. It was against this backdrop that this work examined the possible causes and consequences of cultism in Nigerian higher education institutions and the approaches to be adopted to totally eliminate cultism. The study found out that some of the causes of cultism include:

influence of peer group, parental background, societal moral decadence, erosion of educational standards, lack of recreational facilities, overzealous quest for power and protection among others. The study also observed that some of the aftermaths of cultism include: loss of lives and properties, disruption of academic activities and depletion of youth population. The study recommends that all the stakeholders and government should be more aggressive in their approach to eradication of cultism in the tertiary institutions.

Keywords: cult, cultism, secret cult, societal moral decadence, higher education institution.

Introduction

A cult can be said to emanate from great and excessive admiration or belief in a person or idea. This could be manifested in rituals, praise songs, chants and worship. It is an unquestionable practice that may be difficult to dislodge even with superior argument. Secret cult can be defined as a set of practices, belief systems or ideas which essence is only known to the inner members and is excessively admired and defended even to the point of laying down their lives. It is this doggedness and strong conviction demonstrated by members that reinforce the importance of and awe for the group especially among non-members Opaluwa (2009).

One of the critical and embarrassing problems facing tertiary institutions in Nigeria today is the menace and aggressiveness of cult members and cult related activities. Earlier on, the propensity for destruction of lives and properties on campuses had not been so dastardly and horrible. There is hardly no academic session without reported cases of attacks, killings and maimings of

cultists in operations in most Nigerian tertiary institutions. There is no institution in Nigeria that has not experienced the menace of cultism. According to Okwu (2006), as at September 2003; 5000 students and lecturers had died on Nigerian campuses as a result of cult related violent clashes. The destructive cult activities on campuses in recent times are mind-boggling, distasteful and irritating. Promising young men and women's lives have been cut short by the bloody hands of murderous cult gangs in universities.

The sociological definition of cult according to Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology is "a small group of people whose religious activities and beliefs are typically secret, esoteric and individualistic". Lexican Webster's Dictionary sees secret cult as a group of people who share a common cause and whose mode of meetings and agenda are unknown to the public and where initiation into rank and file is usually done in secret. In the words of Ogunbameru (2004), secret cult is any form of organization whose activities are not only exclusively kept away from the knowledge of others but such activities are carried out at odd hours of the day and they often clash with the accepted norms and values of everyday life. One can therefore say that cultism is a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission, policy and initiation formalities as well as mode of operations are done in secret and kept secret with their activities having negative effects on both members and non-members alike.

In those old good days, the offer of a place of admission in any Nigerian universities to study for any degree was great honour. It was a great achievement both for the prospective undergraduate and their parents. Truly, such a feat was called for celebration as there were only a few universities then. It was only the best and the privileged few that got admission into these

universities. That was in the days when universities were seen in the light of the concept of the “Ivory Tower”, when universities were repositories for high ideals and enviable academic traditions (Itedgere, 2006). Presently, cultism has invaded and has come to stay in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, resulting in rewriting the story of HEIs story for a nosedive. Eneji in Adewale (2005) captures the widening scope of the menace of cultism and its accompanying inimical effects when he reports that cultism with its attendant violence, torture, suppression and unwarranted intimidation perpetrated by cult groups has spread beyond institutions of higher learning to secondary schools in Nigeria. Admittedly, it is important to note that the quality of higher education and learning depends not only on the content of teaching and the curricular but also on the life in the campus. In many Nigerian tertiary institutions, criminality, unrest and insecurity seriously harm the study environment with attendant negative impacts on performance and productivity. Itedgere (2006) confirms that the phenomenon of secret cults is not necessary new in Nigeria society. What is new, perhaps, is their character and methods of operation.

Many students join cult groups unaware of the negative impacts of the membership of cultism on their academic pursuits. However, many students perceive the impact of cultism on academic performance as high. Others perceive cult members as frequently having problems with their learning. The existence of cult groups and its activities have been on the increase in our tertiary institutions leading to disruption of academic programmes and activities, loss of lives, insecurity and destruction of infrastructures. The activities of these cult groups have also led to the killings of innocent students and staff in various tertiary

institutions and in some cases, it has led to the closure of schools (Echekwube, 1999).

Arijesuyo and Olusanya (2011) maintain that despite the existence of Decree 47 of 1989 which prescribes for a five year jail term for any one belonging to campus cults; cultism still continues to assume a major social menace and a serious obstacle to peace and harmony in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria. According to them, although some university authorities through administrative panels have suspended or rusticated some students for participation in cult-related activities and violence, generally cultism has waxed stronger. Findings have shown that highly placed university staff and other prominent members of the society are known to belong to secret cults and often serve as “god fathers” to these young cult members.

The origin of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions

According to Echekwube (1999), the origin of the term "cultism" is from the Latin word “*cultus*” which means worship and is actually associated with the worship of “one God” or “Supreme Being”. He goes further to say that the word cultism originated from the Latin word “*occukre*”, meaning concealed, enigmatical, mysterious, mystical etc. Orukpe (1998:3) notes that “cults are a group of people who share and propagate peculiar secret beliefs divulged only to members”. Explaining further, Lalich and Langone (2006) remarked thus about the behaviour of cultists, “the group displays excessively zealous and unquestionable commitment to its leader and regards his belief system, ideology and practices as the truth. Cultism is generally believed to be a deadly engagement in ritual practices.”

Cultism in Nigeria began since the pre-colonial era when a group of people with the aim of seeking protection from their

ancestors conducted rituals. Secret cults have existed in many parts of the country. The Ekpe secret cult is notable among the Efik; Ogboni secret cults among the Yoruba; Ekine cult in the Delta region and Owegbe cult among the Edo (Adelola, 1997). Moreover, Masquerade and Odo cults existed among the Igbo, just to mention but these few. Therefore, almost everywhere in the world, different types of secret ritual groupings are maintained on the articulation of organizational functions for a variety of social and political reasons. These secret societies differ in what is kept secret and what is made public. In some of them, membership is secret but the rituals are not; while in some instances, membership is made public but the rituals are secret. Opaluwah (2009) acknowledged that, one positive thing about these societies is that they are harmless unless they are provoked. On the other hand, they could serve as an instrument for cleansing the society of any cultural debris. He even observed that some even serve as socialization groups that initiate men and women into adulthood as in “Poro” and “Mende” societies in Siera Leone and “Oviaosese” in Ogoni land. These societies have their belief systems and their trappings tightly protected.

It is noteworthy, that the groups which originated ab initio do not perpetrate harm, maim, kill or destroy as their cohesiveness and absolute allegiance to rules has oriented it to become an elite club, strictly for the altruistic, brightest and the politically conscious members of the society. The elitist group teleguided political events and held important positions within the student body like President, Secretary etc. Their existence was well known by students but was not associated with weird, horrible and spiteful character of latter-day confraternities. Today, the reverse is the case. Cult group in tertiary institutions are violent, they maim, kill and carry out many anti-social activities on

campuses. This calls for various strategies to outlaw them in the institutions.

It was in 1952 that tertiary institutions in Nigeria were associated with secret cults. This was when Soyinka and six others formed the Sea Dogs confraternity known as Pyrates. The idea behind the formation were both patriotic and altruistic as it was not conceived as a secret cult. As summarized by Orintusin (1990), the main objectives of the Sea Dogs were: “to fight non-violently but intellectually and effectively against the imposition of foreign conventions; to revive the age of chivalry and to find a lasting solution to the problems of tribalism and elitism.” Presently, according to Adewale (2005), there are numerous secret cults in Nigerian institutions of higher learning and are all equipped with an elaborate hierarchy, insignia and distinct attires. Some notable of these secret cults include: the Black axe, Eiye confraternity, Vikings, Amazons, Buccaneer, Mafia and Dragons. The female students are not left out as they have their own groups among which are: Temple of Eden, Frigates, Barracudas, and Daughters of Jezebel among others.

Causes of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions

The various causes of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions can be examined as follows:

Parental background: One of the reasons for students joining a cult in the university can be traced to parental background of the students in question. Students who are from homes where codes of good conduct and discipline are strictly enforced, are prone to cultism. According to Olajugbe (2001), parental background, lack of moral instruction at home and the manner in which the child is brought up could be a factor in enrolment as a cult

member. He goes further to explain that excessive control by parents and too many rules could make an individual tense and anxious while on the other hand, a child whose freedom knows no bound may be a ready candidate for cult membership.

In the words of Mgbekem (2004:23), “Some parents love their children to the extent of pampering them” This means that when they do a wrong thing, instead of scolding or beating them, they allow the child to go free from the offence. Such children grow up with such negative habit and consequently, imbibe criminally-oriented behaviours which make them to be attracted to joining cult groups. Owoeye (1997) agrees with this when he established a very strong link between weak and defective family background and influence as tendencies for students joining secret cults. He further observed that parents themselves might be members of secret cults. Cult membership may be as a result of broken homes where child abuse and neglect are very rampant. Ayodele and Ayodele (2002) also identify family breakdown as one of the causes of cultism in the universities. They posit that a child from a broken home is exposed to parental negligence and frustration and such a child is easily induced into cultism. Some students join cults to get over the frustration and discomfort they encounter in their broken homes.

Erosion of standard of education: According to Akinfolarin (2003:56), “the economic downturn in the 1980s and 1990s in the country encouraged corruption and erosion of standards in the educational system. Most students gained admission into the tertiary institutions with dubious credentials. Such students find solace in cultism because of their low self esteem and to survive the rigours of academics at all cost. For such students, to survive in the academic system it involves a game of survival at all cost,

so they join cult groups to intimidate lecturers and the school authorities.

Peer group influence: Peer group influence is a potent factor that compels young undergraduates to join secret cult. According to Ibeh (2005), the period of adolescence is marked by intense social relationship in any environment he finds himself. At adolescent, there is a shift of emphasis on social relationship from the parents to the peer group as the adolescent breaks the total reliance and contact with their parents, they shift same to the newly acquired group which in most cases is any group on campuses they embrace. Akinfolarin (2003) and Omoegun and Akanle (2007) also reported in their studies that peer group influence is one of the reasons students join cults.

Societal moral decadence: Mgbekem (2005) laments that youths nowadays imbibe immoral values instead of inculcating moral and decent values. He posits that this accounts for why the youths see or feel no qualms in joining secret cults. Okeowo (1994) also linked youths propensity to join cult to the general state of normlessness existing in Nigeria. Ogunbameru (1997) lamented that Nigerian society has willingly or unwillingly provided an enabling environment for all forms of crimes among which is the existence of campus secret cult. He argued that Nigeria has replaced honour with dishonour as a standard attitude. Another cause of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions according to Ibukun (1999) is militarization of the Nigerian polity. While the happenings in the universities are offshoot of what happens in the larger society, violence became impressed into the psyche of an average Nigerian. Poor economic prospects that accompany democratic governance in Nigeria seem to make cultism an

attractive option for youths. Moreover, activities of some power-drunk politicians who wish to gain power at all cost, led them to train or recruit young people as thugs in order to suppress their political opponents and most of these recruits are students.

Other reasons for cultism in tertiary institutions identified in the literature reviewed include: lack of recreational facilities, decay in social life and increasing materialism in the society (Omoegun and Akanle, 2007); absence of virile student union, erosion of traditional academic culture (Adewale, 2005); radical quest for power, status and protection (Okwu, 2006); the desire to hold elective posts in the students' union and the desire for security (Ajayi and Ayodele, 2002).

Consequences of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions

The effects of cultism on the campuses cannot be exhausted as both intra and inter-cult clashes negatively affect the students in stupendous proportions. According to Opaluwah (2009:2) "cultism some times lead to incarceration, rustication or expulsion of both students who are innocent and members". Cult clashes lead to an out bust of violence on the campus which leaves many students wounded, maimed or even killed as the case may be. There is no gainsaying the fact that when any of the afore-mentioned happens, the learning process, the psyche of students and the peace of the campus is adversely affected. In cases of closure, hospitalization, suspension or incarceration, the resultant effect is that learning is suspended for some period of time, possibly a year or more.

The effects are wide and varied. Mgbekem (2004:16) captured that "a lot of lives and properties have been destroyed through cult violence" while young undergraduates who are supposed to be leaders of tomorrow have fallen victims of

trigger-happy cultists (Jamiu 2008). In addition, our youths' population is being gradually decimated due to cult activities. Adewale (2005:58) asserts "in the Niger Delta where cult violence is widespread in recent times, properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed in communities in the area. Communities have been sacked as inhabitants flee to different places for safety. Some cult clashes are so catastrophic that loss of infrastructure and other resources will be colossal and eventually the funds that would have been expended on the provision of other facilities and infrastructure on the campus will be used in replacing the damaged ones. The concomitant result of the waste of capital is reduction of the quality and quantity of education as there will not be enough money to purchase the necessary learning equipment nor to cater for the education of many. The peace on the campus is adversely affected whenever there is cult inversion. This may result in suspension of academic activities for some time. Lecturers are threatened into awarding unmerited scores to cultists who do not attend classes (Opaluwah 2009).

The author lamented that nights are no longer safe in the university hostels because of frequent cult disturbances and insecurity. The solid existence of cult groups within the university community has completely made life unsafe and meaningless for both staff and students as female students who refuse the amorous advances of cultists are disdainfully manhandled. Lecturers who insist on merit for passing exams are openly attacked and disgracefully beaten up or sometimes killed. Thus has paved way for the free reign of fear, violence and a palpable feeling of insecurity. The above reasons compel parents now to prefer off-campus accommodation for their children in

tertiary institutions for fear of their being victims of cultist's rampage.

Preventive measures against cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions

According to Fasanmi (2006):

Over the past two decades, various attempts have been made to deal with problem of cultism. The various measures taken to address the spate of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions include the enactment of Decree 47 of 1989 that pronounce a number of years jail term for any cultist found guilty.

In his own view Ibeh (2006) reports that Rivers State government made a law stipulating a ten year jail term sentence without an option of fine for culprits of cultism. Again, the Federal Republic of Nigeria under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000 issued a three-month ultimatum to all Vice Chancellors to eradicate cultism from the campuses. Some higher institutions also set up anti-cult groups consisting of the student body itself and some security agents to monitor and check the activities of cultists on campus. Despite the various measures, it appears the proliferation of cult groups and their dastard acts continue unabated. This is perhaps due to the lukewarm attitude of the government and the university authorities to enforce the rules. In the observation of Ogidefa (2008), there are allegations that some Vice Chancellors were sponsoring cult activities in their universities to silence the voice of dissenters. This appears not to augur well for a citadel of learning. The following preventive measures can be adopted as a

cure or solution to fight and curb the menace of cultism in our tertiary institution in Nigeria:

Establishment of counseling centres: Conselling centres manned by professional counselors should be established in universities. Students should be encouraged by the counselors to face their studies squarely and make their studies priority to other social events. They should open up avenue for offering psychological assistance to the students.

Government and non governmental agencies should step up their campaigns against cultism and its destructive tendencies. The evil nature of cultism should be explained to young people in schools at all levels during orientation programs, sensitization and awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops. Osaigbovo (2000) posits that through seminars, workshops, symposium, posters and handbills and public lectures, cultism may be effectively combated.

Parents should desist from being members of secret cults and also prevent their children from joining bad groups. Moral education should be reintroduced in all spheres of education especially at primary and secondary schools. The decadent society should be spiritually re-awakened. The parents, religious organizations and government are to work jointly on this measure. Parents should be more vigilant concerning the activities of their children within and outside the home.

There should be improvement in the facilities and living conditions on campus so as to minimize perceived strain in the social system which underlines cultism on the campuses (Adewale 2005). Omoegun and Akanle (2007) suggest that universities should be reorganized and well funded to enable it provide facilities for recreation and games so as to attract and

engage the students in useful activities. This will make the youthful exuberances of students to find a rewarding outlet in competitive sports like football, athletics that could engage students usefully in their spare times.

Authorities of institutions of higher learning must show doggedness in their determination to stamp out cultism. They must brace up to the challenges of cultism, which has become one of the most potent evils of the recent time. Adewale (2005) suggests that it is very necessary for the committee of the Vice Chancellors of the Nigerian universities to adopt an innovative and uniform approach to solving the problems of cultism. Students who do not belong to cults can be organized into anti-cult vanguard to watch and report cult members to the university authorities or to law enforcement agents. In the words of Jamui (2008:45), “the school authority must intensify armed patrol and surveillance on campus”. The current effort where students form vigilante groups to monitor cultists should be encouraged. Prompt reaction to cases of cultism is also a necessary approach as delay in taking actions against offenders aggravates the situation.

It is suggested that any member of the public, who is linked with activities of cultism, no matter how highly placed, should be tracked down and brought to book. Academic freedom, autonomy and proper democratization of education will ensure a full participation of students and other marginalized segments of the academic community in the process of policy formulation and decision making.

Conclusion and recommendation

The tertiary institutions' environment in Nigeria in the early years had been encouraging and peaceful before the advent of secret cults. Having thoroughly examined in this study, the meaning,

causes and origin of cultism, the consequences and the preventive measures, one would understand that the existence of secret cults in our tertiary institutions poses continuous threat to our peaceful co-existence. Thus cultism has been largely exposed in the threat to life, destruction of infrastructures, destruction of lives, disruption of university programmes and calendar, and uncertainty about what comes next.

The impact of cultism is not on academics alone, it also exerts its influence on the individual, educational institutions and society at large. Therefore, serious efforts towards the reduction or total elimination of cultism must be adopted in a bid to finding lasting solution to its menace in our tertiary institutions. This should take cognizance of the Nigerian society, as the higher education institutions are a micro Nigerian society. Finally, cultism could be reduced to the barest minimum if only all the stake holders and every member of the society is involved in the strides towards eliminating it.

Recommendations

Taking into cognizance the menace of cultism and its increasing negative effects on tertiary institutions in Nigeria as well as the society; the study suggests that it is imperative on the part of stakeholders in the education sectors, churches, mosques, parents and the society at large to join hands to eradicate the menace before it destroys the whole educational system. Besides, government should introduce capital punishment to those proven to be involved in cult related activities to serve as a deterrent to others. Finally, campus publications like newsletters, journal and magazines should be encouraged to publicize the activities of cults as a way of exposing the cult activities to ridicule some of the foibles of the students and staff alike in our campuses.

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Christian Ezenwa Chuks Ogwudile is a lecturer in Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.