THE MENACE OF CULT ACTIVITIES IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES - THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract
In recent times secret cult activities has assumed an alarming proportion in Nigerian institutions. The situation has become so worrisome that it has attracted the attention of government and well meaning Nigerians to begin to think of ways of curbing the excesses of the cultists or better still eradicating it completely from Nigerian institutions. This paper examines the meaning, the origin or background, and features of the various cult groups in the Nigerian Institutions. It goes further to highlight the reasons why students join secret cults and why it strives irrespective of efforts made to eradicate it. The adverse effects of cult activities on individual students, educational institutions and the society in general were not left out. The paper concludes with the roles of stakeholders in curbing the cult menace and ways of encouraging cult members who denounced cult membership.

Introduction
In recent times, secret cult activities in Nigerian educational institutions have assumed an alarming proportion. This has become a great menace to the innocent students of tertiary institutions and thus a matter of serious concern to the society and government.

Information concerning the nature and the modus operandi of secret cults on our campuses are revealed through sources like television, radio, newspaper, magazines, police reports and confessional statements from culprits.

Secret cultism in all its ramification is bad. Our institutions of learning are no longer conducive for teaching and learning because of the activities of the various secret cults and the effects these activities has on individuals, groups and the academic process.

From the look of things, the cult menace is growing from an epidemic to a cankerworm, eating deep into the fabrics of our society, the education system being the most plagued. The cultists have taken possession of our campuses and laid siege on the larger society, we are in deep trouble and unless immediate drastic and equally harsh actions are taken urgently there will be no hiding place for all. Properties are destroyed and lives are lost, lecturers are intimidated, female students are raped. The sum total of the scenario is that cultists have graduated from brutality and armed robbery to satanic terrorism,
demonic gangsterism, senseless fundamentalism and mindless murderers, they are living beyond sanity. The result of all these, is the frequent closure of tertiary institutions which may consequently contribute to the fall in standard of education.

The most unfortunate thing about cult activities is that it is not only limited to higher institutions of learning but it is gradually spreading to our secondary schools in recent times. This trend should be of great concern to innocent students, authorities of institutions of learning, parents and the government. To support this assertion, Olaoye, (1996) explained that in Nigeria it is not only in the tertiary institutions i.e. polytechnics, universities and colleges of education, that secret cult activities have reared the ugly head. Media reports have it that secondary school children have been caught carrying out rituals under the supervisions of older persons. This is certainly a dangerous trend considering the length our youth can go because of their youthful exuberance.

Since this phenomenon in our institution of learning has taken a dangerous dimension, there is the urgent need for the students, school authorities, parents, the society in general and the government to device means of eradicating this menace in our educational institutions.

Meaning of 'Cult'

New standard encyclopedia defined cult as a system of religious observances or'extravagant devotion to a person, cause or thing - A group of persons having an excessive interest in something.

World Book dictionary sees cult as a system of religious worship especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies. A group or sect whose practices or beliefs are separated from generally acceptable values and creeds.

A cult according to Oxford Learner's Dictionary is a small group of people with extreme religious beliefs and who are not part of any established religion.

Furthermore, the 1983 Chambers 20th Century Dictionary sees it as a system of religious beliefs: an unorthodox or false religion a great, often excessive, admire for a person or idea.

The 1989 constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria defined Secret Society as Any association, group or body or persons (whether registered or not) that uses secret signs oaths, rites or symbols and which is formed to promote a cause. The purpose or part of the purpose of which is to foster the interest of its members and to aid one another under any circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice to the detriment of the legitimate interest of those who are not members. The membership of which is incompatible with the functions or dignity of any public office under this constitution, and whose members are sworn to observe oaths of secrecy. The activities of which are not known to the public at large, the names of whose members are kept secret and whose meetings and other activities are held in secret.
Generally speaking, cult is a group whose activities are shrouded in secrecy and which could use unconventional and unacceptable means in dispensing its activities, which are mostly esoteric and individualistic. Cultism according to World Book dictionary is adherence or devotion to a cult or indulgence in cult activities and practices while a cultist is one who is a slave to a cult.

From all the definitions we can see that the cultists act irrationally, emotionally and without recourse to rational reasoning and restraint.

**Origin or Background of Cult Activities in Nigeria**

According to Ehase (2007), the beginning of cult activities in Nigerian Universities dates back to the year 1953. Then in the University of Ibadan when the Nobel Laureate Professor Wole Soyinka and a few of his friends called *The G7* decided to set up a social club, which they christened the *Pirates confraternity*. Their aim was to abolish convention — behaviour as "it was during the colonial period (by fighting, non-violently, but intellectually and effectively against the impositions of foreign convention) and promote the spirit of chivalry (by finding a lasting solution to the spirit of tribalism and elitism). Indeed history has it that the Pirates confraternity are some of the brightest, cleanest, and most politically conscious among the students. But soon what started as a social club turned into a cult involved in the massacre of students.

Continuing he wondered just how the cult spread to the other universities in the country or how, according to a Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) report, 33 cult group sprang up from the *social club* remains a mystery to many.

Writing in support of the above report, Vanguard Newspaper (1999) traced the origin of cult activities in Nigerian universities in its reports that a seeming harmless club - Pirates (pyrates) confraternity - formed by Wole Soyinka and others in the University College, Ibadan in 1953 has balkanized into some 40 secret cults on university campuses today. The most dreaded and notorious ones being the Buccaneers, the Black axe, Black eye, Black ants and the all female cult, Daughters of Jezebel. They have degenerated to societies of horror, blood-sucking, death and destruction, that have over awed everybody.

**Names of Cults and their General Features**

From the definitions given above as secret cults could be viewed as an informal association composed of people with similar beliefs, common bond, strong group solidarity, their activities are shrouded in secrecy. They are associations whose activities and names of members are not known to non-members: members swear oath of secrecy, and they perform rituals at odd times which are unpleasant to the public.

Names of secret cults in Nigerian Universities include among others Pirates, the Buccaneers, the Sea dogs, the Black axe, the Dragons, the Black Barrettes, the
Black cats, the Mafia, the Amazons, Eye, Vikings, Black ants, Daughters of Jezebel, e.t.c These are the popular ones but as indicated earlier, reports has it that they are up to 40 cult groups existing in Nigerian universities.

Features of these cults: Kazeem (2004) identified the various features of secret cults. Members hold secret meetings at odd times. Symbols signs and coded language are used for communication.

Each group of secret cult has its own peculiar and unique mode of dressing (regalia) which could be red; black or any other colour.

There are inscriptions of different designs on the body of members. Members possess weapons like dagger, knives, cutlasses, guns, axes, clubs, masks etc which are used during attacks and initiations.

Predisposition for Joining Cult Groups

Studies have revealed that there are several factors responsible for students joining secret cults. Among these factors are: Heritage from parents; influence by peer groups; curiosity; influence of foreign films and crime novels; poor administration of institutions; insecurity; search for an identity and others.

1. Heritage from Parents: Some parents are members of secret societies like Ogboni, Ibile, ROF, Lodge or Amoroc. When the children of such people get to campus, they too register as members of secret cults in order to have a taste of what their parents are experiencing. Onugha, (1996) explained that:

   > Secret societies in Nigerian educational institutions draw their strength from corresponding organisation in the adult world. These students' societies are in touch with their influential alumni who give them moral and material support as when necessary.

2. Influence by peer groups: Another major factor that encourages students to be members of secret cults, is peer group. Students who innocently keep the company of secret cult members stand the chance of being easily lured into cultism. This is so, because there is tendency for friends to influence friends either consciously or unconsciously as the saying goes evil association.

3. Influence of Foreign Films and Crime Novels: Students exposures to foreign films and novels that are violent in nature do at times contribute to students becoming members of secret cult. Some of the war and mafia films shown in movies have negative effects on students. At times the methods of operation of secret cults are copied through these means. Olaoye, (1996) opines that: Influence of alien violent culture and practices typified in films of the mafia shown
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...on public video centres, televisions and home video contribute to the planning, formation and operation of cults on campuses. It should be noted that mafia has a sophisticated organisation structure and strike capabilities.

4. Curiosity: Some group of students become members of secret cult out of curiosity, they want to know what secret cult is all about - its membership, mode of operation and the features so that they could have first hand information of what cultism entails. But unfortunately, very few later quits while many find it difficult to quit.

5. Insecurity on Campuses: This is one of the factors that lure students into cults. Some students feel insecure on campus in the hands of secret cult members and probably lecturers. This group of people sees secret cults as the only alternative that could guarantee their protection. When in cults, they have the belief that they cannot be easily touched by other secret cult members, the school authority or be victimized by lecturers.

6. Poor Administration of Institution: Secret cults may thrive in an environment that is not conducive for learning. When authorities of institutions are unable to manage crisis effectively or accommodate critics like student unionism, provide essential services like electricity, water, adequate classrooms, hostel accommodation there is the tendency for students to come together under the cover of cultism, to challenge the authority and cause confusion in the institution.

7. Search for Identity: Some students join secret cults so as to identify themselves with a particular group and feel that they belong. To buttress this argument, Onugha, (1996) maintained that: Quite a few students join secret societies because they are in search of an identity; they cannot stand on their own and so look for a group they can identify with. The most feared group is usually the obvious choice and this is invariably a secret society.

The Reasons Why Cult Activities Thrives in Universities

It has become irresistible to get into the debates and discussions on the upsurge of cult activities in our institutions of higher learning. The matter has been elevated to a high pedestrian in the consciousness of the average individual because of the thunderous activities of the campus cults in recent times. Of note are the activities of campus cults in the universities of Ife, Ibadan, Lagos and Delta State universities.

People have come up with various suggestions to the solution of this ugly trend, but most of the solutions suggested so far have not sought to attack the problem at the root, they are merely
cosmetic. Nobody has suggested solutions in the mode of leadership by example rather than precepts.

Most of these children involved in the Campus cult activities are still in their formative years. They are more easily influenced by examples than by precepts. The leaders and elders must search their minds to see how much of example they are offering these restive children. On the contrary, leaders tend to direct the attention of these youths to negative behaviours.

These cultists mainly are children of the top politicians and rich people in the society. They have become sacred cows and untouchables who hide under the influence of their parents to perpetrate all kinds of crimes.

It is also fearful and depressing to note that cult members have godfathers among lecturers and highly placed individuals in the society like government officials and businessmen. In the light of this one wonders how anti-cult war can be successful when those who are supposed to fight it are on the contrary fuelling it indirectly.

In the time past the police have been known to directly or indirectly aid cult activities in the school because when suspects are apprehended and handed over to the police for prosecution, they are let off the hook, the moment they pay a bribe, only to come back to unleash terror on innocent and law abiding student. (Oliomogbe 1999;2004) Another glaring reason why it has become difficult to stamp out cult activities in our universities is that parents has woefully failed to teach their children the ways of God. Many emphasize materialism to the detriment of morals and righteousness. The Bible says bring up a child in the way he shall go and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Effects of Secret Cults:-

The multiplier effects of cultism in the Nigerian higher institutions are overwhelming. They could be felt on the individual, on the educational institutions and society at large.

Effects on Individuals: Membership in a cult group usually lead to loss of self-identity. In an ideal situation, tertiary education is expected to produce an all round developed personality but unfortunately, cult members made this impossible because their personal identity are now submerged under group identity. They now take up the features of their cult group,

i. Moral Decadence
ii. Poor Academic Performance
iii. Insecurity in Campuses:

Effects on Educational Institutions
i. Fall in Standard of Education
ii. Crisis and Confusion on Campus
iii. School rules and regulations are bent in favour of Cultists:

Effects on the Society:

i. Increase in crime rate
ii. Indiscipline and corruption
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iii. Loss of lives during cult Activities:

Roles of Stakeholders in Curbing Cult Activities in Campuses

Cult activities affect various spheres of human existence. From the look of things, cult menace is growing from an epidemic to a canker worm eating deep into the fabrics of our society, the educational system being the worst plagued. A serious illness therefore deserves very serious treatment. All hands should now be on deck towards finding lasting solution to the menace.

Role of Parents: The prayer of every parent is for the children to succeed him or her and be more prosperous in life. Control of cultism must begin at the roots - the home front as the saying goes - Charity begins at home.

There are parents who become rich through dubious means. Many of them are indisciplined, uncultured and ungodly. They make their ill-gotten wealth carelessly available to their children. Consequently many of their children have been recorded as being the worst in the society as noted earlier. They are either the leaders of the decadent groups or the financiers of the lawless children who terrorize other law-abiding students and teachers. It is therefore suggested that parents should not give their children access to too much money. Other roles parents should play in curbing campus cults should include to be role models to their children, their style of living should not be ostentatious but rather moderate and should equally ensure that they acquire their wealth through honest means.

Parents and guardians should take greater interest in the affairs of their children to direct them well guard against unwholesome companionship.

Most importantly, parents should not belong to secret societies and should not engage in any activity that will encourage their children to join cults.

The Role of Students: The physical move to identify with any cult that seemed compatible to an individual for any reason at all is a matter of the mind. Students should therefore resolve not to join any cult no matter the situation, rather they should take their studies seriously.

They should avoid having people of dubious or questionable characters as friends because an adage says an evil communication corrupts good manners.

Students should desist from reading crime novels, war films and pornographic magazines but rather devote most of their leisure times to activities that will draw them closer to God.

The Role of Government: We can only solve this problem if government is fully ready to deal with any cultist irrespective of his/her parents status. Cases abound when cultists have been apprehended and handed over to the security agents only to be seen on campus a few days later.

There is the house of Representative Secret Cult and Secret Society prohibition Bill, 2001 which stipulates a jail term of five years or a fine
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of N250,000 or both for offenders, but the nagging question is, how many cultists have been prosecuted or jailed?

Apart from the law federal government has promulgated to punish offenders, she should still intensify efforts in sponsoring seminars, conferences and workshops to identify the causes of cultism on our campuses and the appropriate steps to be taken to eradicate it completely.

Governments should also encourage courts of law to stop granting bails to students suspected for cult activities because such students will find their ways back to the institutions.

The Role of School Authorities: As a stakeholder in the fight against cult activities, the school authority, has parts to play in curbing cult activities in campus.

It is observed that the university authorities always had the list of cult members but have persistently refused to take any action against them because of their selfish interest. In order to curb cult activities in the universities;

• There should be adequate hostel accommodation within the campuses for students. The idea of students being scattered all over the neighbouring towns and villages does not augur well for the kind of solidarity needed in the university setting.

• Another way is consistent and organized mass action against cultists. Such action should be either pre-emptive or defensive.

• Public enlightenment programmes such as talk shops, rallies, symposia will also be useful in exposing the evils of cult activities.

• Recreational facilities, better infrastructure and a conducive academic environment will ease social tension and promote the psychological training of students.

The Role of the Society: Nigerian society should have a re-think on the culture of might is right which cult activities strives to emulate. It is unfortunate that today's culture of permissiveness had deprived our youth the knowledge of determining right from wrong. The society attaches a lot of respect, honour and 'dignity to wealth no matter how it was acquired hence the proliferation and bastardization of Chieftaincy titles and honourary degrees.

Role of the Church: The church should be the source of dissemination of morale to all and sundry -it has very important part to play in the moral upbringing of the youths. Majority of Nigerian youths are Christians who belong to one Christian denomination or another. The Church leaders should among other things create activities that engage the youths in meaningful religious activities such as youth week, youth rally, quiz competition, youth conference, seminars etc.

Church leaders should be visiting universities to organize crusades and talks as resource persons.
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Campus fellowships should be encouraged so long as it does not interfere with students study periods.

It is observed that Church leaders live left their primary role of leading people to the Kingdom of God and diverted their attention to preaching topics that will lead to acquisition of wealth. Worst still, they have gone ahead to confer titles to rich members, and offer them sitting positions in the choicest part of the church. ALL these impact negatively on the psyche of the youths.

Mass orientation campaign should be put in place for new students against joining cults, stickers, t-shirts, banners, and pamphlets should be used as avenues for sensitization and discouragement of new students against cult activities. (They should effectively stress the negative aspects of joining a cult.

Ways of Encouraging those who Denounced Cult Membership

Cult members should be encouraged to denounce their membership. Students who eventually denounced cult activities should be encouraged to re-direct their energy towards positive and intellectual activities rather frivolities.

Cult denouncees live with perpetual uncertainty for fear of possible execution by their fellow members. This is so because their fellow members wouldn't like them to live to expose other members and their secrets. Therefore denouncees should be given adequate security.

Another way of encouraging them is through prayer sessions. Christian fellowships should adopt such persons as their members pray for him always and feed him adequately with the encouraging words from the Bible. There should be follow-up visits by Christians until security and confidence is restored in them.

Encouragement may also be given in terms of mouth watering gifts. Money, books and other materials that will aid them in life. They could be awarded scholarship to cover the rest of the duration in the institutions. These laudable gestures may encourage others to denounce cult activities.

Conclusion

Tertiary institutions are set up to train individuals to be morally sound and productive to themselves, their immediate families and the society at large. But unfortunately it has been observed that secret cult members has invaded the campus and made the hitherto citadels of learning uncomfortable for academic activities. Cultists engage in activities that are not only detrimental to themselves but to the innocent students, the school authority and to the society at large. These groups of people are known for destruction of lives and properties, maiming, harassment and rape. The end result of this is upheal and frequent closure of schools, which invariably affects the standard of education in the country.

Secret cult is evil in any way one looks at it. How it can be stamped out on
our campuses should be the primary concern and responsibility of everyone - individuals students, school authorities, parents, society and the government.

References


