



Review Paper

## Cultism and Violent Crime: An Appraisal of the Security Challenges in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

Gbenemene Kpae

Center for Conflict and Gender Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria  
benkpae@hotmail.com

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### Abstract

*Cultism has been a serious social problem facing the Nigerian society. Recently, the Niger Delta of Nigeria has seen rising cases of cult related killings. Cult rivalry is at the center of most homicide committed by cult members. Cult groups are always in constant battle for supremacy and control over turf. Many young people are lured into joining cult because of peer pressure, the desire to belong, and to seek for protection. Our security agencies appear to be overwhelmed by the criminal activities of cultist groups. Apart from criminal homicide, cult members are also linked to other unlawful behaviours such as armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, arson and illegal arms trade. The proliferation of cult groups in the Niger Delta is due to fall in moral standard, structural imbalances in our society, and near total collapse of the Nigerian socio-economic system. While the threat of cultism seems unabated all stakeholders particularly, the government and security agencies need to work together to checkmate the activities of these cult groups. This paper critically examines the problem of cultism, violent crime and insecurity in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. It uses Robert Merton's Anomie theory as the theoretical framework to analyze the problem of cultism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Cultism, violent crime, insecurity, Niger Delta, Nigeria.

### Introduction

The name 'cultism' is synonymous with terror, because they terrorize innocent members of the public as well as rival cult members. Many communities in the Niger Delta have been ravaged by cult related activities. On daily basis, there are reports in the news of killings associated with cult clashes and rivalry. The militarization of the Nigerian polity has entrenched the culture of violence in the Niger Delta as cult members are used by political leaders to unleash violence on opposition and political opponents.

The universities and colleges are also not immune of this menace. Cult groups have been linked with various criminal offences such as extortion, kidnapping, armed robbery, drug trafficking, intimidation, protection rackets, and political assassinations (The Guardian Newspaper 13<sup>th</sup>, September, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Many of the killings are as a result of battle for supremacy or control over turf. Illegal firearms are used in the cause of fighting for street control. The use of firearms is intended to instill fear in the minds of rival cultist. As cultism is fast spreading in most communities and urban areas of the Niger Delta, their activities (though violent and illegal) are beginning to be an acceptable behaviour in the society, especially for the young people who believe that joining cult groups would make them earn respect from their peers. Apart from gaining respect from peer groups, their criminal activities have also been legitimized by the political class, who use cult members to intimidate and harass political opponents.

### Operationalization of Concepts

**Cultism:** The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'cult' as a small group of individuals and are extremist in their beliefs and are do not belong to any form of organized religion. Similarly, the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology (1996) in Rotimi<sup>2</sup> defines cult as a small group or religious activities whose beliefs are typically secret, esoteric, and individualistic.

**Secret Cult:** Lexicon Webster Dictionary<sup>3</sup> defines secret cult as a group of individual with and whose way of meeting and agenda are secretive and where initiation into people of the lowest rank are done in secret. Ogunbameru<sup>4</sup> defines secret cult as an organized group whose activities are kept from the public but such activities are carried out at very odd times that conflict with the acceptable norms and values of the regular society. Further, Ogunade<sup>5</sup> defined a secret cult as an organization or association that is discreet in its activities but devoted to the same cause. It is a secretive group having very extreme ideology and performs series of rites and uses sacred symbols to identify its members. He also notes that in Nigeria the term 'secret cult' was first used by the former Military Head of State- Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida between 1983-1984 to describe groups that were operating in secret. Prior to this time they were usually referred to as fraternities. The members of the cult group, according to Ogunade<sup>5</sup> are very violent and uses oath taking as a way of bonding the members together and to obtain commit themselves to oath and allegiance from its members.

**Secret Societies:** The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999)<sup>6</sup> as amended defines a secret society as any society, association, group or body of persons that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols as a way of advancing the interest of its members and to the detriment of non members Maquet<sup>7</sup> defines secret societies as any discreet association with closed membership. These societies are also 'fraternities' established for the sole purpose of achieving specific ends. They are called 'secret' because very few people have idea about their operation. Similarly, Offiong<sup>8</sup> explained that secret societies make use of particular rituals, signs, symbols and forms of knowledge that are hidden from non-members and are used as a source of power for its members.

Secret cults exist in various parts of Nigeria; they are not restricted to a particular region of the country. Every tribe and ethnic group in Nigeria has its own form of secret cult, and many of these secret societies have been in existence in pre-colonial era. Some of them have metamorphosed into the modern day fraternities and secret cult. For instance, Ogunade<sup>5</sup> believes that secret societies can be of three different type namely, religious, semi-religious and anti-social secret societies.

### **Theoretical Analysis of Cultism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria**

Anomie theory provides an ideal framework for understanding and analyzing the problem of cultism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The idea of anomie presupposes a state of lack or the absence of normal ethical or social standards of behaviour. It is a condition in which society provides very little guidance to regulate the behavior of individuals. It is also the breakdown of social bonds that binds the individual to their community. In other words, Anomie occurs when there are no clear standards to guide behavior in a specified area of social life. When such situation arises, people feel at complete loss and worried, and begin to behave the way they like. As a result, criminality and other violent behaviours becomes the order of the day (Obah Akpowoghaha)<sup>9</sup>.

The concept of anomie first emerged in 1893 when Emile Durkheim published his book titled: "The Division of Labour in Society." According to Durkheim<sup>10</sup>, anomie simply means a state of normlessness. This is where the rules that regulate how individuals interact with one another were disintegrated and people are unable to determine how to act with one another. In other words, anomie is a state where the expectations of behavior are unclear, and the system has broken down completely.

Durkheim believes that anomie would arise where there is a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider societal standards, or from the lack of social ethic which produces moral regulation. Durkheim in his later work on suicide associated anomie to the influence of or lack of norms or norms rigidity.

Durkheim believes that the existence of anomie could cause division of labour and rapid social change. Durkheim attributed these changes to modernity. Durkheim argues that modernity could lead to increasing division of labour which weakens a community's sense of identification and its ability to control human behavior. When these conditions arise, there would be social disintegration, egocentricism and norm violation. In such circumstance, Durkheim contends that human behavior can only be put in check by forces outside of him. Such forces outside the individual Durkheim describes as a "collective conscience". He describes collective conscience as a social bond that is expressed through ideas, beliefs and norms of a culture.

The concept of anomie was borrowed by Merton cited in Iwarimie-Jaja<sup>11</sup> in his analysis of American society. Merton's use and interpretation of the concept of anomie appears to be quite different from that of Durkheim. According to Merton, anomie or state of normlessness would arise where there is a disjuncture between culturally accepted goals such as earning a high income, and the socially approved means such as obtaining a college degree.

Merton believes that the high rate of criminality in America compared to other countries are due to American society's emphasis on success goals more than the emphasis on approved means of achieving those goals. Merton argues that the stratification of the American society limits the opportunities for achieving success for the less privileged member of the society. Those in the lower strata of society, mostly the poor, result to illegal and illegitimate means to achieve success. Merton also asserts that people respond to this state of normlessness in different ways, but those most likely to be affected are retreat rather than conforming to societal values. Merton notes that those under the greatest pressure to violate the law are those at the lower levels of the stratification system. In sum, Merton asserts that it is the combination of the cultural emphasis on people to strive to be successful and the social structure that limits opportunities for people of lower socio-economic background that produces intense pressure for deviation.

The problem of cultism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria can be analyzed in the context of Merton's argument. In Nigerian, everybody is enjoined to strive for success goals through approved means, but the opportunities to reach these goals through approved means are not equally distributed. Many people in the lower strata of society do not have the opportunities to achieve success through approved means. Many of these individuals, especially the youths, resort to criminal activities, such as armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, illegal oil bunkering etc in order to achieve the societal and cultural values on material success. In fact, the class structure of Nigerian society closes access to achieving success through approved means for a considerable number of people. Individuals that belong to lower socio-economic background have limited access to achieving success goals through approved means, as a result many of these persons who are frustrated

because of their condition join cult groups and other criminal gangs to perpetrate violence and criminal violence on communities.

## The history of Cultism in Nigeria

In different parts of the world various forms of secret cult groups exist for variety of reasons including social and political purposes. The process of becoming a cult member also varies from groups to groups. In some groups, to become a member is kept discreet and the ritual process is not, while in others membership is made public but the ritual process is kept secret from members of the public (Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi)<sup>12</sup>. In Nigeria, however, cultism is traceable to the pre-colonial era when people in the rural communities formed themselves into groups with the sole purpose of making supplications to their ancestors for protection by way of rituals. This practice had existed in many parts of Nigeria, especially the West (Yoruba) with the predominance of Ogboni secret cult. Apart from Ogboni cult, other cult groups existed during pre-colonial Nigeria in different parts of Nigeria. Sometime before independence, these ancestral practices eventually moved from the rural communities to the tertiary institutions.

## Cultism in Nigerian Universities

The modern day cultism was unknown to the Nigerian universities until when some students of University of Ibadan formed the 'Seadogs Confraternity', otherwise known as, 'Pirates Confraternity'. Unfortunately, the rationale behind students establishing confraternity, which was purely patriotic and altruistic, has now been defeated. Recently, those altruistic purposes have been overtaken by violence in cult activities on university campuses. Scholars have also advanced various arguments and reasons for the formation of pirate confraternity, but they all agree that it was for the advancement of a better society rather than the negative picture presented by the present day cult groups.

In fact, the main objectives for the formation of the group were to criticize social ills in society and the western ways of living prevalent among Nigerians then. However, despite how nice the idea behind the establishment of Seadogs was, the confraternity has fragmented into several other groups which have become great rivals towards one another. These cult groups include Black Axe, Vikings, Amazons, Buccaneer, Mafia, Dragons, Musketeers, Scavengers, Sailors, Elgemface, Temple of Eden, Frigates, Barracudas, Daughters of Jezebel, White Angels, Black Brasserie etc. Other strands of cult groups have also spread to streets corners such as Deygbam, Deywell, Icelanders, and Clansmen etc. Both the university and street cults have caused tremendous havoc on the lives of people.

Adigwu<sup>13</sup> contends that the reason for the formation of seadogs pirates by a group of students at the University of Ibadan was to protest against conventional style of dressing that existed on the campus. The students believe the styles of dressing were still patterned towards the colonial masters. Unfortunately, this non-

conformist posture actually puts many members of the group against the university administration.

The "Pirates Confraternity", having gained ground at the University of Ibadan spread to other university campuses and dominated cult activities on university campuses in Nigeria for almost two decades until the emergence of the Buccaneers Confraternity (also known as Sea lords) in 1972. Adigwu<sup>13</sup> confirms that during this period, most prominent Nigerian student belonged to the Pirate Confraternity and their presence was felt in almost every part of the country.

Ogunade<sup>5</sup> asserts that secret cults in the Nigerian higher institutions started as fraternities with the sole purpose of exposing and addressing acts of injustices and victimization against students. They achieved this through publications of pamphlets.

According to Ogunlusi<sup>14</sup> the formation of fraternities at the University of Ibadan actually started with the formation of a group known as "Eiye", which means bird in Yoruba language. The Eiye group which later metamorphosed into Pirate fraternity was registered by the university administration as a cultural association, and members adopted different bird names as a sign of identity (Adigwu)<sup>13</sup>.

The "Eiye" fraternity was formed not only to preserve Yoruba culture and heritage but to maintain its traditional ways of healing and making things happen spiritually. According to Ogunlusi<sup>14</sup>, stresses that it was the desire of the early founders of the pirate fraternity that Yoruba students should be able to communicate with their ancestors. The spirits of the ancestors were described as "ogere a fi oko yeri" or mother earth.

During the early period of the formation of confraternities on university campus in Nigeria (1960s and 1970s), violence was not associated with the groups. The members were students of high academic standings. For instance, Adigwu<sup>13</sup> notes that most of pirates and Buccaneer confraternities were first class and second class upper students. To buttress his argument, he asserts that the first seven founders of Buccaneers are currently Ph.D holders, while the rest have higher degrees in various disciplines (Adigwu)<sup>13</sup>.

Despite producing some of the top class students at the University, pirates and Buccaneer have also produced some top academics that have distinguished themselves in varying disciplines all around the globe. For example, Pirates has produced the first Nobel Laureate in literature from the African continent. Since the activities of the fraternities were centered on promotion of knowledge and African culture, they also received support from university administration during their rag day celebration.

In the Nigerian Universities of today and in other institutions of higher learning, this peaceful co-existent between

Confraternities and school authorities that existed before no longer exist. Confraternities in the universities and colleges are now known for violence. This change in ideology actually began in the early 1980s with the emergence of the “Black Axe Movement” or “New Black Movement” from the University of Benin.

The major problem is that cultism that was hitherto known to university campuses has now spread to local communities and inner city centres, as many unemployed youth have taken to cultism as a way of extricating themselves out of the difficult economic situation. These cult groups such as Icelands and survive mainly on criminality such as kidnapping, armed robbery and illegal arms trade. Since their criminal activities are so clandestine, they are able evade police apprehension. Cult rivalry and battle over turf usually lead to deadly consequences as innocent citizens are killed during such street fights.

### **Causes of Cultism in Nigeria**

Several factors might explain the cause of cultism in Nigeria. This may include frustration among jobless youths and fallen moral standard in our society. For instance, Ajayi, et al<sup>12</sup> believe the cause of cultism in Nigeria and especially in the Niger Delta is due to fallen moral values in society. Also, (Mgbekem)<sup>15</sup> in Ajayi et al<sup>12</sup> asserts that youth of nowadays have taken into immoral values rather than assimilating moral and decent values. However, Okeowo<sup>16</sup> in Ajayi et al<sup>12</sup> linked youths desire to join cult groups to the state of normlessness that exist in Nigeria society.

As our society is gradually shifting from communal to a more individualistic way of living, many youths are seeking attention from peer groups. Some of the peer associations engage in activities that are criminal in nature. When our societies were communal, the discipline of children used to be the collective responsibility of the entire community, but most metropolitan cities of the Niger Delta today are experiencing high level of criminality, leading to high level of distrust and individual life pattern the urban centres. During the early period of the formation of cult groups in the universities and colleges, (1950s and 1960s) criminality was not part of their modus operandi, and Nigerian society did not tolerate any criminal behavior associated with cult groups. However, presently, cultism and cult-related activities seems to have gained notoriety in most communities and urban areas. Other causes of cultism include, unemployment/joblessness, manipulation by elites, discontent with socio-economic situation, selfish interest of youth/ethnic differences, revenge against past wrong doings, ego/excitement of being a member of cult groups (wrong value), fear of what would happen if one do not join, and unfair distribution of resources/marginalization (Abbey)<sup>17</sup>. While un-employment and frustration with the socio-economic situation in Nigeria may explain the reason why some street youths join cult groups, however peer influence and the desire to belong might explain why those in the universities and colleges join cult groups.

According to Ahire<sup>18</sup>, a Professor of Criminology Amadu Bello University, Zaria, cultism is a form of corruption which seeks to establish a clandestine or underground sub-culture to subvert, undermine and destroy the goals and objectives of the affected organization. He argued that cultism thrives in Nigerian universities because they are populated largely by naïve and impressionistic under 20 youths who have probably escaped from direct parental control for the first time. Furthermore, he noted that those from cult infested communities or secondary schools lead the way in establishing specific cult identities in the universities. However, the view by Ahire<sup>18</sup> that it was those from cult infested secondary schools and communities who establish cult identifies on campus seems to contradict scholarly work on the origin of cultism on Nigeria universities. Previous literature on the history and origin cultism on university campuses states that it started from University of Ibadan before other splinter group broke away.

Some other students who join cult groups on university campus are lured to join through a combination of deceit and intimidation. In sum, he believed that perceived insecurity by students coupled with inadequate infrastructure for boading, learning and self-actualization, all exert pressure on the students to seek remedial insurance through cultism. Today, the Nigerian universities are filled with various cult groups, and many of them are in rivalry against one another. For instance, in a recent study of one of the Nigerian universities, 26 distinct cult groups were uncovered, some of them men and others for women. It is not clear from the review of relevant literatures how cultism appears to proliferate in Nigerian higher institutions, and have spread to high schools and local communities.

### **Conclusion**

Cultism is the cause of many criminal activities in the Niger Delta. Cultism has been practiced in traditional Nigerian societies especially among the Yorubas and Edos, however the modern day cultism started in the late 1960s when Wole Soyinka and other members established the Seadog fraternity group. The reason for the establishment of the confraternity was ultraistic, but later became polarized into other splinter groups such as Buccaneers, Vikings, etc. These cult groups have also spread to the rural communities and urban centers and are posing very serious challenge to law enforcement agents. Street cult groups such as Deegbam, Deywell and Icelanders, have the same modus operandi just like university cult groups but appears more dangerous than the later because their activities seems to affect the public more than when it was limited to university campuses. Moreover, as cult groups are beginning to enjoy more political patronage from influential politicians, due to the militarization of the Nigerian polity, many of them seems to go unprosecuted even when apprehended. In fact, due to the terror that cult groups are unleashing on local communities, some families in the Niger Delta area have been forced to vacate their homes and relocate to other communities, while others have started raising their young children, particularly males, to

become cultist so that they can defend their families in case of an attack from cult groups. Many young people are pushed into joining cult due frustration and lack of legitimate means to be successful. Consequently, cultism and gangsterism have become the only medium through which the young ones in the Niger Delta can acquire both street credibility and the material things that are highly cherished by the Nigerian society. We, therefore, recommend information sharing amongst security agencies and the use of community policing in the investigation and apprehension of cultists. The hideouts of cultist and other dangerous criminals will be exposed when there is partnership between the public and the police and there is information sharing among the various departments of law enforcement agencies.

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