

CULT VIOLENT ACTIVITIES IN UNIVERSITIES: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper examines cult violent activities in universities in Nigeria. The paper diagnoses empirical incidents of cult violent conflicts in universities, the legislations enacted to regulate student activities to prevent them from engaging in secret cult activities and the efforts made by some universities at eliminating cultism. The paper establishes that in spite of the legislations to regulate student activities and the efforts to eliminate cultism, some factors are responsible for the failure of the existing measures to curb cult violent conflicts. The paper concludes, among others, that the best way to eradicate cultism is moral persuasion of students, with adequate cooperation and support from all stakeholders in the university system who, in some cases, were often indicted of aiding and abetting cultists in the institutions.

Key Words: Cultism, Violence, Conflict, Universities

Introduction

Umukoro (2009) noted that “the university is a factory; a production factory in its own right; and we all, in our respective capacities, are factory workers”. According to him, “the university is a factory with a difference—a factory designed not for the manufacture of goods and merchandise; but precisely a factory of ideas; an intellectual factory in which ideas are produced, processed and packaged for the use of the larger society”. He stated further that the training and production of graduates, crucial as it is, is not even the ultimate goal of university education, because the university admits, matriculates and graduates students from year to year; rather, “the ritual is a means to an end, the end being the propagation and dissemination of valuable ideas for use by the immediate society and the world at large”.

Based on the above, and in recognition of the important roles of universities in nation building, the issue of cult violence conflicts has

been a severe hindrance to the achievement of the laudable goals of universities in Nigeria. From available evidence, incidents of cult violent activities pervaded, at alarming rate, in universities in Nigeria (Etadon, 2008). The spate of killings and maiming by cultists in our higher institutions have reached a level whereby one wonders if the institutions have not been turned into battle grounds for the free operations of criminals under the disguise of studentship.

Empirical Incidents of Cult Violent Conflicts in Universities

According to Etadon (2008), the incidence of cult violent conflicts in universities in Nigeria can be attributed to the general breakdown of values which are supposed to be held sacrosanct. The premium attached to human life, he noted, has plummeted so badly that youths in the universities can now maim or kill outrightly without fear. Also, because most crimes in our society go unpunished or undetected, the penchant or inclination for dastardly acts has been on the upsurge.

Ifaturoti (1994), while commenting on the issue of cultism in universities, noted that violence within the Nigerian campuses has, in recent times, reached unprecedented proportions. Such violence, he said, is ascribed to the phenomenon of fraternity groups or societies commonly described as 'secret cults'. According to him:

this violence has resulted in damage, not only against private and public property, but also in bodily harm and, in extreme cases, death of students. The orgy of violence has received extensive media coverage and has sent waves of panic and fear through the university communities and a shocked and outraged Nigerian public.

Enumerating some of the factors that have aided students in cultism, Ojo (1995) identified their bid for:

power and drugs, excessive consumption of alcohol in a rather permissive environment, lack of supervision by the authorities, lack of courage on the part of university authorities to deal firmly and ruthlessly with culprits, most especially if they are well connected.

As a result, cult conflict is now a common feature in the universities. For instance in November 1993, there was a violent clash between the students of the University of Ibadan and a nearby tertiary institution.

Several cars and buildings were destroyed. Even though the clash was said to have arisen from the refusal of one of the institutions to partake in the "Anti- Abacha demonstration", many believed that the violence was, indeed, masterminded and escalated by cult members in the two institutions. The riot also saw the residents living within the area affected in the two institutions deserting their quarters because of serious threats to their lives and property (Guardian, November 25, 1993).

In 1998, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, ten students of the institution were shot and hospitalized when secret cult members stormed the examination hall thus creating uneasy calm throughout the institution (Daily Times, November 18, 1998).

At the University of Ibadan, on August 18, 1998, two rival cult groups – the Eiyeye Confraternity and the Black Axe – converged in the midnight and brutally assaulted themselves at the Students Union Building of the university. The cultists' unleashed terror and killed two students who were believed to belong to one of the cult groups as a way of redressing some grievances. The clash continued on the following day and several innocent students were wounded and a food caterer operating in the campus was also killed. The Black Axe, which felt aggrieved by the killing of two of its members by the Eiyeye Confraternity, revenged by killing another member of the Eiyeye Confraternity the following day in a nearby residential area to the university (Nigerian Tribune, August 23, 1998).

Also, in January 2000, there was a serious attack on some student leaders at the University of Ibadan by cultists, in the midnight, when a former Students' Union President, the then President, and some other students were seriously injured. The assailants used guns and other deadly weapons for the dastardly acts (Nigerian Tribune, January 31, 2000).

In a manner reminiscent of the tactics of the American and Italian mafia, some cultists stormed the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in year 2000 and left fourteen people dead in the wake of the visit. In the previous week of the incident, the Chief Security Officer of the university was brutally murdered. In the same institution, between April and September 2000, three students were murdered in cold blood by unknown assassins, in a manner that indicated secret cult involvement,

both at the Nsukka and Enugu campuses of the institution (Daily Times, September 4, 2000).

In September 2003, tension enveloped the University of Ibadan as factional fighting broke out among rival cult groups in the institution over supremacy. Sporadic gun shots rent the air in the campus as the suspected cultist engaged each other. Also in June 2004, in the same university, there were two incidents at Abadina and Awba Dam areas of the institution, during which two persons were killed (U. I. Special Release, June 22, 2004). The above situation is a replica of what goes on in many other universities in the country.

The Use of Dangerous Weapons for Cult Violent Conflicts

The alarming dimensions of these cult conflicts on campuses are that several of them involved the use of dangerous weapons, including fire arms by the cult members'. In varying degrees, institutions and persons have been traumatized by the heinous activities of the cult "boys" and "girls". The crisis situation is somewhat captured by the following editorial:

... the spate of killings and maiming by the cultist in our higher institutions have reached a level whereby parents can no longer be sure of the safety of their children in any of those institutions as long as the cult activities are left to operate (Vanguard, February 17, 1997).

According to the National Anti-cult Campaign of Nigeria, "about 983 students died between 1995 and 1999 at the hands of cultist". As a result, various universities set up Panels of Investigation to look into the immediate and remote causes of the incidents and make appropriate recommendations to the university authorities so that those involved, if known, could be placed on trial and disciplined by the Student Disciplinary Committee (SDC) of the institutions, or be handed over to the law enforcement agents for prosecution for murder by the law court, as the case may be. However, despite all these measures, cult related conflicts still persist in the universities.

Legislations Enacted To Regulate Students' Activities in Nigerian Universities

Under the Nigerian Legal system, various legislations exist, which seek to regulate as well as control unlawful activities by any student or group of students. Ifaturoti (1994) noted that the Nigerian Constitution is the starting point with reference to the activities of those fraternities known as secret cult in Nigerian universities. The constitution recognizes and guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to peaceful assembly and association. Notwithstanding these rights, Section 35 (4) of the Constitution provides an exemption to the general rule that no person is entitled to take part in the activities or be a member of any secret society. In doing so, the Constitution defines a secret society as:

a society or association not being a solely cultural or religious body that uses signs, oaths, rites, or symbols; (a) whose meetings or other activities are held in secret; and (b) whose members are under oath, obligation or other threat to promote the interest of its members or aid one another under all circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice, to the detriment of the legitimate expectation of those who are not members.

Ojo (1995) noted that the Federal Government in Section 35 (4) of a Constitutional provision stipulated that the freedom of thought, conscience and religion as entrenched in the Constitution did not protect, nor could it be stretched to cover anyone belonging to a secret society. The idea behind this provision is to minimize, if not to completely eliminate, the evil effects of extreme favouritism and partnership for which secret societies are noted.

Despite the general provisions of the criminal code and the Constitution of the laws which made secret societies unlawful and render any person convicted for such offences liable to punishment, secret cult related conflicts and violence still continued in universities. Consequently, the government promulgated the Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree No. 47 of 1989 whereby a special court was set up to determine cult related matters. Prior to the decree, there were no special courts set up to hear and determine

certain categories of cases involving university students (Ifaturoti, 1994).

Ironically, jail terms for convicted students and expulsion from universities have not dissuaded more students from joining secret cults. Rather, adherents seem to be more determined than ever. Not even the existence of Decree No.47 of 1989 (Students' Union Activities Control and Regulation Decree) seems capable of deterring others. As contained in the editorial of a newspaper, "the continued involvement of students in secret cult activities seems to have defied the dictum that the existence of punishment is to serve as deterrence" (Guardian, March 9, 1993).

Under Section 2 of the Decree, it is provided that where any society by whatever name called or known operating within the campus of a university or any institution of higher learning in Nigeria is pursuing activities, which are:

(a) not in the interest of national security, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health or illegal, inimical, destructive or unlawful, the Governing Council, Vice Chancellor or any authority or person in charge of the university or institution of higher learning shall, after conducting investigations with respect thereto, proscribe any such society (Ojo 1995).

The Decree made it an offence under Section 2 (2) for students to engage or organize other students to participate in the activities of any society proscribed under 2 (1) of this section. Furthermore, under Section 3 (1) of the decree, the Minister of Education is empowered, whenever he is of the opinion that public interest or public safety so demands, to suspend for any specific periods of time, remove, withdraw, or expel any student, undergraduate or postgraduate from any university, institution of higher learning or similar institutions. This power here conferred on the Minister could be delegated under Section 3 (2) (a) & (b) to any person or body authorized by the Minister to do so. The action could be on his behalf or the Governing Council, Vice-Chancellor or any authority or person in charge of or in control of the institution. There is however a right of appeal within 28 days of receiving notification of dismissal engrafted in Section 3 (2) of the Decree by any aggrieved student to make representation to that effect,

to the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, whose decision on the matter should be final and conclusive (Ojo, 1995).

Decree No. 47 of 1989 has been widely criticized by various scholars on the grounds that it can be used as an instrument of oppression against students or other persons considered undesirable by the government or university authorities. The criticisms are valid, for the Minister of Education has the powers, if necessary in his opinion, to dismiss or rusticate a student. Such opinion may be based on personal hatred, misinformation and recklessness. However, after the promulgation of Decree No. 47, several students have been charged before tribunals set up under the Decree and found guilty. The first set of university students to be convicted by the tribunal was given an option of a Five thousand naira fine or six months imprisonment (Ifaturoti, 1994).

While noting the ineffectiveness of the instruments to check cultism, a legal practitioner stated that cultism continues to persist on campuses despite all instruments put in place to check it. Such laws are Decree 47 of 1989, titled "Students Union Activities Control and Regulation Decree", and Section 38 (4), Section 107 (1) (g), and Section 137 (1) (h) of the 1999 Constitution, which outlawed the membership of secret cults. He however listed poverty, inferiority complex, lack of home training, greed and laziness as some of the factors responsible for cultism (Guardian, June 13, 1999).

In spite of the ineffectiveness of these legal instruments, frantic efforts have been made to eliminate cultism from the campuses.

Efforts at Eliminating Cultism in Universities

Taking a critical look at the incidents of cultism in tertiary institutions of learning, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Professor Adewoye, stated that "only divine intervention can wipe it from the country's school system". He was of the view that "there has to be serious prayers to God for the return of sense of decency and tolerance on the crusade against cultism on campuses" (Daily Times, July 29, 1999).

Similarly, Awe (2000) described "cultism as a spiritual problem which only the use of legal instruments cannot eradicate". According to him, "the motivation to rape, murder, commit arson and other vices

associated with cultism are ‘spiritually influenced’ and that the solution was spiritual and not legal” (Daily Times, January 12, 2000).

However, in 1999, there was a stern order by the Federal Government to Heads of tertiary institutions to extirpate cultism from their various campuses or “face the music”. The Presidential order, according to opinion leaders, was as a result of the number of deaths caused by the cultists and the danger they pose to academic freedom. The government therefore gave One hundred and fifty-four million naira (N154m) to universities to fight cultism. At the expiration of the three months deadline given from July to October, 1999 to Vice-Chancellors to eliminate cultism in their campuses, many of the institutions assembled their arsenals for an epic offensive against the menace of cultism among students and lecturers.

Earlier, at the University of Ibadan for example, the Governing Council proscribed all secret cults in the campus. Council, again, at its meeting held in March 28, 1995 re-affirmed the proscription. Consequently, all students of the university were directed to swear to an affidavit of undertaking not to belong to, patronize, support, aid or be in any way whatever involved in any secret cult or activities, or any association of students not registered and approved by the university. Council further directed that the affidavit must be sworn to only in the High Court and not before a Justice of Peace (UI Official Bulletin No. 1198 of April 21, 1995).

Again, following the Presidential order in 1999, the University of Ibadan inaugurated a 10-man Anti-cultism Panel, to spearhead the fight against the scourge of cultism on the campus. The Panel comprised members of the academia and religious leaders. At the inauguration of the Panel, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Adewoye, stated that:

it has become necessary to have an organizational focal point for the fight against cultism on this campus; to coordinate all efforts as a community in fighting the evil phenomena in addition to other measures being taken. Cultism can be ruinous to life, and the objective of the campaign is not the suppression of the evil, but its extermination (U.I. Official

Bulletin, No.1472 of August 24, 1999).

Consequently, in January 2000, no fewer than 170 cultists from the University of Ibadan renounced their membership of secret cult. The

declaration took place at a one-day programme tagged “Holy Ghost Service” organized by a Church (Nigerian Tribune, January 17, 2000). Since then, using the moral persuasion point of view, the university has been organizing series of enlightenment programmes on the eradication of cultism. For instance, in 2010, anti- cultism lecture was delivered at the university titled “War against Campus Cultism: A Necessity for National Development”. Also, in the same year, the Anti-Cultism Campaign Committee organized series of talks in various Faculties in the university on the ills of cultism and the efforts at combating the menace in the university (Anti- Cultism Campaign Committee Memorandum on Schedule of Visits of Campaign to Faculties dated 12 June, 2010).

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, also in compliance with the Presidential order in 1999, set up a 12-man Ad-hoc Committee on the eradication of cultism on both campuses of the institution. Inaugurating the Committee, the Acting Vice-Chancellor of the institution observed that cult activities had created so much social problems for universities and that his administration was determined “to halt further attempts by unscrupulous elements to institutionalize the practice within the campus”. He advised staff and students who were involved in secret cult activities to renounce their memberships (Post Express, January 11, 1999).

In other institutions, the preferred tactics appear to be moral-suasion and an offer for students to renounce their membership of secret cults. The working relationship with the Police Command, coupled with inputs from other anti-cultism members within and outside the campus, has produced a lot of cult members in the universities who may face disciplinary actions should they remain recalcitrant. The lists of cult members were drawn up from a couple of official sources, including the religious groups, the state security service, and the informants working for the university authorities.

In another development, a socio-cultural group, the Neo-Black Movement (NBM) of Africa, identified investment in youth development, curtailment of violent and obscure movies and admission into schools on merit, among ways to eliminate cultism from tertiary institutions (Guardian, September 12, 1999).

Similarly and obviously aware of the menace and dangers they are causing to lives and property in the universities by their nefarious

activities, the cultist met to find ways of forestalling bloody clashes among themselves. On Sunday, 17 February, 1991, representatives of cults met at one of the universities to harmonize their operations and forestall bloody clashes among themselves. The organizations represented, according to the paper, were the Black Axe, Pyrate Confraternity and the supreme Eiyé Confraternity. Many institutions were believed to have been represented at the meeting (Nigerian Tribune, March 27, 2000).

Again, in March 2000, Heads of the various secret cults operating in the universities converged in a “rare case of camaraderie”, in one of the ancient cities in the country to canvass for a programme of action that will lead to an effective disarmament of all cults in the nation’s tertiary institutions. Leaders of the various cults, including the Eiyé Confraternity, Buccaneers, Pyrate and other secret societies, were invited by another cult-the Neo Black Movement of Africa (NBM) otherwise known as the Black Axe-to rub minds on how to put an end to violent clashes in the nation’s tertiary institutions and the country as a whole (Nigerian Tribune, March 27, 2000).

The leader of the Neo Black Movement of Africa (NBM) had earlier at a press conference on “Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria, with particular reference to tertiary schools” warned that the attempt to end campus cultism by fiat or force based on ultimatum could encourage cult groups to continue to use non-conventional ways of expression. (Guardian, September 12, 1999). Linking the upsurge in cult related violence in schools to the proscription of some campus groups, he observed that before the proscription, violence was minimal or negligible.

Similarly, repentant cultist, as reported in the Sunday Times of July 18, 1999, advised the government to abandon the use of force in dealing with the menace of cults on the campuses. Rather, the cults should be registered like other social clubs in higher institutions. However, in spite of all the efforts at eliminating cultism, cult violent conflicts still prevail at a high level in Nigerian universities.

Failure of Existing Measures to Curb Cult Violent Conflicts

It is obvious that the measures taken by the government and university authorities to curb the excesses of secret cults and cults violent conflicts have, to a large extent, recorded minimal success. According to Ifaturoti

(1994), the proscription of fraternities formed by students by university authorities has not worked, especially in the light of Decree No.47 of 1989. While good was intended by the introduction of the decree, its enactment has proved to be counter-productive. Many of the fraternities were forced underground where they either materialize in another form or even engage in delinquent activities to taunt the authorities. Many students in their youthful exuberance are in fact more attracted to these underground societies.

The disbandment of the student union government during the military era further aggravated the formation of secret cults which was used to fight not only the school authorities but also fellow students. Some people have blamed it on the complicity of the school authorities whereby lecturers were alleged to be members of secret societies on campuses. This complicates the enforcement of laws and control of cultism on the campuses.

The alleged inclusion of cult members in Anti-Cult Campaign Committee has also been responsible for the failure of the existing measures to curb cult violent conflicts. As noted by the leader of a fraction of the National Association of Nigeria Students (NANS), such members never contributed to the elimination of cultism, but rather, they protected their vested interests (Nigerian Tribune, July 12, 2002). Another very potent factor that has aided cultism to thrive in the institutions is the very unhealthy and filthy living environment of students. Ike (1991) observed when discussing the management of universities in the 1990 that:

many hostels in Nigerian universities cannot claim to provide health and learning environment for their students. The official student allocation to each room often exceeds the number for which the rooms was originally built. Unauthorized occupants aggravated the situation. The toilets and bathroom facilities are unable to cope with the increased student population [thereby] creating health hazards, apart from the negative psychological effects the slum environment has on students.

With the foregoing social and physical environment, students are already socially conditioned through stress into a pathological mental

state that disposes them to aggression. This explains why cult conflicts persist at a high rate in the universities with all its gory tales.

Implications for Policy

With concerted efforts on the part of all stakeholders in the university system, this study has implication for the formulation of policies that can permanently establish a process of denunciation, renunciation, and perhaps outright elimination of cult members and cultism from Nigerian universities and the society as a whole, through persuasion.

Burton (1989:137-138) was of the view that:

...conflict, like sex, is an essential creative element in human relationships, and the means to change, the means by which our social values of welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved, [hence]...the existence of a flow of conflict is the only guarantee that the aspirations of society will be attained. Indeed, conflict like sex is to be enjoyed.

The above is a total contradiction considering the meaning, the menace and the negative implications of cult violent conflicts in universities. In other words, there is no relationship between cult violent conflicts and an acceptable and recognized guarantee to the attainment of the aspirations of any society that abhors the evil effects of cultism and cult violent conflicts. It is therefore a phenomenon that should be stamped out or eradicated completely. It is therefore recommended that:

- University authorities should, with the full support of all stakeholders in the university system, employ moral persuasion of students who are into cultism to renounce their membership and denounce the act. The authorities should also further exert firmness and courage in dealing with issues of cultism and cult related conflicts.
- Students' activities should be adequately supervised and monitored through guidance and counseling by lecturers and trained guidance counsellors, while admission into universities should be subject to denouncement and renouncement of cultism. Denunciation and renunciation should therefore be held on regular basis in the system.

- There should be curtailment of violence and obscured movies and films which expose students or youths in the society to crimes and violence.
- The Nation state should improve the socio-economic situation in the country and also restore the moral fibre of the society for students and youths generally to have faith in the university system and the country as a whole, to avoid cultism.

Conclusion

Industrial peace and harmony are sine-qua-non for effective productivity in higher education in Nigeria. Indeed, peace and harmony should be the watchword of any organization or industry, including the universities, in view of the benefits of university education to the socio-economic, political, cultural and technological development of an emerging nation like Nigeria. Efforts should therefore be geared towards the elimination of cultism by stakeholders in the university system, so that our universities can achieve the objectives for which they were established.

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