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## Higher Education and the Challenges of Secret Cults

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### Abstract

*It is a truism that secret cult, as the name signifies, is secret and evil. On the other hand, challenges in whatever form posing a threat to higher education, which is conceived with the aim of bringing light and emancipation to mankind should be surmounted. This paper critically examined the challenges posed by secret cults to higher education using the descriptive survey design. The sample for the study comprised 400 of 300 level students of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, the University of Benin, Benin and the Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye. Rapid increases in the recorded incidences of violence attributed to cult subcultures were witnessed. The findings showed that cult/gang groups operated violently and that a lot of people (especially students) had been*

*maimed and many lives had been lost through their activities on many Nigerian university campuses. Panacea to this ugly incidence within the higher education set-up is proffered as lasting solution.*

**Key Words:** Higher Education, Secret Cults

### **Background of the study**

The year 1952 could be said to be the beginning of cultism in Nigerian institutions of higher learning when a Mr. Wole Soyinka and a group of six friends formed the Pyrates Confraternity at the elite University College, Ibadan, then part of the University of London. Unknown to us, this Mr. Wole Soyinka was a future professor, Nobel Prize winner and an international writer of note. According to the Pyrates, the “Magnificent Seven”, as they called themselves, observed that the university was populated with wealthy students associated with the colonial powers and a few poorer students striving in manner and dress to be accepted by the more advantaged students, while social life was dictated by tribal affiliation. Soyinka would later note that the Pyrates wanted to differentiate themselves from

stodgy establishment and its pretentious products in a new educational institution different from culture of hypocritical and affluent middle class, different from alienated colonial aristocrats.

The organization adopted the motto “Against all conventions”, the skull and crossbones as their logo, while members adopted confraternity names such as “Cap’n Blood” and “Long John Silver”. As a radical movement, when the then UI students, for instance, protested a proposal to build a railroad across the road leading to the university, fearing that easier transportation would make the university less exclusive, the Pyrates successfully ridiculed the argument as elitist. Roughly analogous to the fraternities and sororities of North America, the Pyrates Confraternity proved popular among students, even after the original members graduated. Membership was open to any promising male student, regardless of tribe or race, but selection was stringent and most applicants were denied. For almost 20 years, the Pyrates were the only confraternity on Nigerian university campuses.

In the late 1960s, Nigerian university campuses were adversely affected by the civil war that was then ravaging the country. Details are contested but it appears that in 1972 a Mr. Bolaji Carew and several others were expelled from Pyrates for failing to meet expected standards. In reaction to this and other events, the Pyrates registered themselves under the name National Association of Seadogs (NAS) and, at least one source (Smah 2001) says that the Pyrates pulled themselves out of the universities. Carew went to found the Buccaneer Confraternity (also called the National Associations of Sea Lords), largely copying the Seadogs’ structure, symbols and ceremonies. A major impetus for the creation of new confraternities was the fact

that members of the new groups simply did not meet the high academic and intellectual standards set by the Seadogs and thus considered the original organization to be elitist. However, Soyinka would later point to individuals who became accustomed to exerting power in the rigidly hierarchical confraternity, and were unwilling to give it up, as to blame for the initial schism. As new groups formed, inter-group tensions led to fighting, though these were initially limited to fistfights.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Spread**

In the 1980s, confraternities spread throughout the over 300 institutions of higher education in the country. The Neo-Black Movement of Africa (also called Black Axe) emerged from the University of Benin while the Supreme Eyiye Confraternity (also known as the National Association of Air Lords) broke off from Black Axe. In 1983, students at the University of Calabar founded the Eternal Fraternal Order of the Legion Consortium (the Klansmen Konfraternity), while a former member of the Buccaneers Confraternity started the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (the Adventurers or, alternately, the De Norsemen Club of Nigeria) the following year. This time period saw a drastic change in the role of the confraternities. The coup of 1983 caused a large degree of political tension. Military leaders, beginning in the 1980s, began to see the confraternities as a check on the student unions and university staff, who were the only organized groups opposing military rule. The confraternities were thus provided payment and weapon to use against student activists, though the weapons were often used in deadly inter-confraternity rivalries. It was observed that some university vice-chancellors protected confraternities which were known to be violent and used them to attack students deemed troublesome. During this period the confraternities introduced a new tradition of carrying out ritual practices (Voodoo), before any other activity. Perhaps in reaction to the changes, in 1984, Wole Soyinka declared that the Seadogs should not operate on any Nigerian university campus.

The wind of confraternity activities blew all over Nigeria and confraternities engaged in a bloody struggle for supremacy. The Family Confraternity (the Campus Mafia or the Mafia) emerged. Shortly after their arrival, several students were expelled from Abia State University for cheating and “cultism”, a reference to the voodoo-practicing confraternities, which marked the beginning of a shift of confraternity activities from the university to off campus. However the consolidation of confraternity activities outside Nigerian University campuses was boosted by the so-called nation-wide renouncement of cultism by university students and the breakdown of campus cults all over the country as a result of amnesty granted to all renounced cultists in the 1990s. This led to migration of cultist from the campuses to residential neighbourhoods and streets as campuses were no more safe haven for

them. Incompetence of government officials and inadequate facilities to police campuses by University Authorities led to the resurgence of cultism in the campuses as renounced cultist who could not be protected by the law, went back to their cult groups to seek protection from rival groups who have unraveled their identity as a result of the various renouncement ceremonies. This resulted in a situation where cult groups were now well established in and outside the campuses.

The Brotherhood of the Blood (also known as Two-Two (Black Beret)), another notorious confraternity, was founded at Enugu State University of Science and Technology. Another cult, the Victor Charlie Boys, was established by Augustine Ahiazu when he was Vice-chancellor of the Rivers State University of Science and Technology. The cults established in the early 1990s are legion; they include: Second Son of Satan (SSS), Night Cadet, Sonmen, Mgba Mgba Brothers, Temple of Eden, Trojan Horse, Jurists, White Bishops, Gentlemen Clubs, Fame, Executioners, Dreaded friend of Friends, Eagle Club, Black Scorpion, Red Sea Horse, Fraternity of Friends and others.

The Klansmen Konfraternity expanded their influence by creating a “street and creek” wing, Deebam, to fight for control territory outside of the universities through violence and crime. In response, the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) established their own street creek group, Dewell. When Dewell was unable to match Deebam, the SVC created a second confraternity wing, the Icelanders (German), which would eventually be led by militia leader Ateke Tom. The Outlaws, another well-known street and creek confraternity, began as a splinter group of the Icelanders (German).

In the late 1990s, all-female confraternities began to be formed. These include the Black Brazier (Bra Bra), the Viqueens, Daughters of Jezebel, and the Damsel. Female confraternities have supplied spies for allied male confraternities as well as acted as prostitution syndicates. There are fears in some quarters that secret cults might have spread to secondary schools in some states in Nigeria.

### **Attacks**

In early 1981, the cults struck on the campus of the University of Lagos attacking students and staff and, notably, destroyed a car belonging to the P.A.R. (Students) Mr. Tunde Gbayisomore, among others. The cults also struck in 1982 at the University of Ibadan and destroyed lives and properties. On July 10, 1999, one of the most notable single attacks occurred at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in Ile-Ife. Earlier on, OAU had been considered one of the safest universities in the country, largely due to student-organized resistance to the confraternities. After one cult member was shot and killed during an attempted kidnapping in 1991, the confraternities appeared to stay away from the university. In February 1999, student

leaders organized a campus-wide search, which found eight secret cult members who were stockpiling machine guns and other weapons in their armoury. This enraged the Black Axe confraternity, who organized a murder squad that hacked the student union secretary-general to death in his bed and targeted other student leaders. The following day, the OAU Student's Union demanded the resignation of Vice-Chancellor Prof. Wale Omole, who was seen as obstructing efforts to fight confraternities by refusing to expel the eight cultists who had been found stockpiling weapons. Students also manned checkpoints and carried out searches for cult members still on campus, arresting suspects. In one case, students became worried over the collusion of the police and stormed a police station to re-seize a suspect they had previously turned over. The then Nigerian Education Minister Tunde Adeniran dismissed Omole and ordered university administrators to eradicate confraternities from their campuses by September 1999. In response, hundreds of cult members publicly renounced their confraternity and cult-associated violence temporarily subsided; needless to say that these many attacks of the cults overwhelmed prominent and peasant Nigerians. Among others, Information Minister Alex Akinyele attributed the 1991 cult attack on students' parents membership of the Ogboni Fraternity. But Akinyele missed the point because parental membership may not necessarily determine a child's membership. Besides, Ogboni and its ilks all over Nigeria are like Freemasons (Ayandele 1974) which are social clubs all over the world.

### **Recruitment**

The cultists do recruit. During the first weeks of the school year, confraternity alumni and members swarm campuses recruiting new members in like manner of the religious bodies on the campuses. Initiation ceremonies normally involve severe beatings, in order to test their endurance, as well as ingestion of liquid mixed with blood. Male initiates may sometimes be required to pass an additional hurdle before becoming full members, including raping a popular female student or a female member of the university staff. Among the all-female Bra-bra, Jezebel or Amazons, prospective members may be required to undergo six rounds of rough sexual intercourse or fight against a group of women or against a much stronger man. Cults also charge annual membership fees of between 10,000 (US\$80) and N30,000 naira.

### **Deeds**

Normal criminal activities for cults include intimidating professors into giving high grades, including by burning their cars or briefly abducting their children. Since the 1980s, confraternities have murdered people who are thought to have 'stolen' a member's girlfriend, or sugar daddy in the case of female groups. Female groups began operating as prostitution rings relatively early. The majority of confraternities, as of 2005, were engaged in a variety of money-making criminal activities, ranging from armed robbery to kidnapping. Cult members may also get

money from political figures, who wish to intimidate their opponents. The exact death toll of confraternity activities is unclear. One estimate in 2002 was that 250 people had been killed in campus cult-related murders in the previous decade (Adewale 2005) while the Exam Ethics Project lobby group estimated that 115 students and teachers had been killed between 1993 and 2003. However those figures pale into insignificance when compared with recent cult activities in Benin City in 2008 and 2009, with over 40 cult related deaths recorded monthly. In the Niger Delta, confraternities are deeply enmeshed in the conflict in the oil-rich delta. Most of the campus cults have been accused of kidnapping foreign oil workers for ransom. While many of the militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), employ confraternity members as combatants. The Outlaws, is also a MEND commander.

Campus cults are said to offer job opportunities to member after graduation; as confraternities are said to have extensive connections with political and military figures. They are said to have alumni networking opportunities. The Supreme Vikings Confraternity, for example, boasts Rivers State and Bayelsa State Executive Council are cult members (Diriwari 2009).

### **Statement of problem**

As student cultism falls within the purview of human activity or experience, it is subjected to scientific probing in a methodological way. The natural problem (question) associated with such an issue is whether we can actually observe what is secret. That, however depends on whether a particular or a non- particular observational approach is employed in the exercise of data gathering. In this study, neither of the approaches was employed in the data collection because we did not set out to study the internal working of secret organization. Rather, our objective was to assess the difficulties induced by violent cult activities in universities. In a sense, this is a self-admission that cults exist in universities and we are interested in both the indicators and how they affect campus living and learning. That is why a rather indirect approach was adopted in understanding how frequent the phenomenon of cult was from the university communities, not from cultists, even though they might have been part of the samples. It is our opinion however that non-investigation of such a phenomenon like cult on Nigerian University campuses would remain a national problem.

### **Objectives of study**

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. investigate whether cult groups truly exist in the Nigerian institutions of higher learning.
- ii. trace the genesis of the said groups, its organization and modus operandi.

- iii. establish the impact of the activities of the cult groups on the members of the Nigerian institutions of higher learning and the larger society.

### **Research questions**

Three research questions were raised for the research:

- i. Do cult groups truly exist in Nigerian higher learning institutions?
- ii. Do cult groups really have a genesis?
- iii. Do cult groups' activities have any impact on the society?

### **Methodology**

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. All the 300 level students of the University of Lagos Akoka, the Obafemi Awolowo Ile-Ife, the University of Benin, Benin and the Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye constituted the population of the study. A sample of 400 students was drawn from the universities used in this study. Two research instruments: questionnaire and oral interview were used to elicit information for the data (primary and secondary data).

Trips were carried out to the selected universities before actual fieldwork commenced. While in these universities, the researcher engaged students and staff in discussion that bordered on the issue of secret cults and the implications for fruitful academic activities. This survey was a great eye-opener to the fact that many people would want to be involved in not only discussion on the subject but be practical about ensuring peace on the campus. Some students however, gleefully replied to a question on the extent of the problem in his campus that they might be killed. It was realized that campuses of universities nowadays could hardly support free intellectual discussions on local and international issues, talk less of serious security ones such as cultism.

### **Data presentation and analysis**

The major formats for the presentation of data obtained from the fieldwork were simple statistical techniques, such as ratios and percentages used in the data analysis.

### **Findings and discussion**

- Two of the selected universities were established in the 1960s: the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife. The University of Benin and Olabisi Onabanjo University were established in the early and late 1970s. This shows that these last two Universities are likely to be afflicted by lack of adequate infrastructure since the economic crunch of the 1980s laid the



foundation for infrastructure underdevelopment in Nigeria a few years after their establishment.

- Most respondents were males (i.e. 50.55%), indicating the willingness of males to volunteer discussion on the subject than females Christian as predominant religious belief of the respondents.
- Most students reported living on – campus (77.74%), with the majority of respondents being Nigerians (92.69%). The information reveals that most students (67.9%) were aware of the existence of certain cult-related organization on campus of course, a typical campus of Universities in Nigeria could have as many as 40 cult groups besides other supposedly non-cultic, non-violent socio –cultural organizations (Ogunsanya, 1998).
- There was an overwhelming agreement among students that cult/gang groups operated violently (69.63% and 60.64%).
- Our discussions point to the phenomenon of secret subcultures that pose some danger or threats to peaceful academic activities, if not checked.

### **Conclusion/suggestion**

The violent outburst recreational student associations as well as cult groups that should remain ‘secret’ were linked to military-style administration of institutions of higher education, underfunding, excellence and discipline. The problem of secret cult infestation was observed to be structures and therefore requires a structural response in form of increased funding, reduction in the brain drain phenomenon and globalization of the academic culture and standards.

Part of the larger framework for the problems of higher education in Nigeria is the shift from the motives for the demand for higher education by the independence nationalists to the present problems and agitation bordering on the management and funding of higher education by the stakeholders. During the last two decades or more, tertiary educational institutions, especially the Universities have experienced repeated strike actions. These, within short intervals, with different labour unions taking turns, were connected with demand for improved working conditions and welfare packages for members. Labour unrests had characterized Universities in the last two decades than in those earlier years when both academics and students engaged in demonstrations to defend or fight against poor government economic or foreign policies. University administrations and the Federal authorities became more high-handed and militarized against students and staff unions and associations ordinarily meant for professional and recreational purposes. Also, over the years there have been declining funding of higher education, even though more and more universities are being established in the country. Brain drain was an option for those who could not



cope with situation. As a result of the underfunding and related problems of higher education over the last two decades, many well-trained Nigerians and expatriates have left the services of the Universities. Recently, a National Universities Commission's document revealed that Universities (represented by the NUC) presently are able to meet only about 30% of their academic staff needs. The Staff-Student ratios have been very unproportional, presently averaging 1:700<sup>+</sup>.

This put a challenge on the quality of teaching and research by staff and students. In fact, the World Bank recently observed that graduates of Nigerian Universities of the last ten years were unemployable, partly due to the paralyzing effects of the management and funding of the institutions as well as because of incessant strike action by industrial unions operating on campuses. The cumulative effects of such scenarios are wide-ranging. For example, one of the critical fall-outs of such situations is the pervading presence of secret cults among students. Most students are unable to cope with long periods out of school due to strike actions. Also, the result of high student-staff ratio means low supervision of the students by staff. It is clear that the quality of higher education and students' benefits of the university depend not only on the content of teaching and the curricula but also on the life on the campus. In many African Universities, unrest, criminality and insecurity seriously harm the study situation. In Nigerian universities, a specific form of such social problems is the presence of secret cults.

The emergence of secret cult subcultures creates an enabling environment for the perpetration of moral evil as adaptive mechanisms or strategies in the face of increasing decline in the national spirit. In other words, the emergence of cult subcultures is a response to the decay in the quality of higher education in Nigeria over the past two decades. This is a form of coping strategy by youth to the societal decay and apprehension in the national objectives of self-reliance drive. As important as the various renouncement of membership of cults on university campuses of the 1990s was, it is not enough. Wherever and whenever they (secret cults) are noted to still exist, authorities should not be overtly tough on them but should get them booked (registered) like clubs on the campuses so as to be able to keep dossier on them in case of any eventuality.

This cultism problem as a form of students' unrest is quite different in relation to the students' problems in the past. It has caused parents, University administrators and policy makers as well as researchers and educational planners a lot of concerns.

The consequences of such bizarre activities are wide-ranging and far-reaching. Many students have lost their opportunities, other have died, while others have been maimed, raped and harassed.

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