

# Street Cultism in Nigeria: Implications for National Development

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## **Abstract**

*The rise in unemployment has propelled the increase in street cultism as indigenous youths see cultism as an avenue to make money. This is achieved by wreaking havoc in communities through armed robbery, drug trafficking, kidnapping and electoral violence. Hence, the objective of this paper is to examine the implications of street cultism on the national development of Nigeria. Qualitative technique was adopted and the findings from this paper revealed that disgruntled youths from broken homes or dysfunctional youths experiencing unemployment and squalor see cultism as an avenue for making money in order to afford basic necessities for living through unscrupulous, deviant and perilous means. It therefore concludes and recommends that for cultism to be eradicated regular seminars, town hall meetings as well as public lectures must be organized by the media, academic leaders, traditional, community and religious leaders at the grassroot level on a daily basis so as to expose the dangers of cultism on the lives and future of the youth as well as its implications for national development. In addition, the parents must create a loving and peaceful home environment for the children where conflict resolution and healthy communication can be taught. That way youths are not negatively influenced by cult groups. Lastly, the youths must be empowered and not left to their fate after graduation because the fastest way to eliminate cultism is to empower the youths so that they do not get deceived into a vicious cycle of crime.*

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## **Introduction**

From inception, the menace of cultism was limited to university campuses but in recent times, their operations have infiltrated primary and secondary schools and so the multiplication and duplication of different cult groups with different ideology and operations marked the beginning of the extension of cultism from educational institutions to local communities. Hence, the recruitment and initiation of artisans, farmers, motor park touts, miscreants, commercial motorcyclists, street urchins, commercial drivers, traders, bus conductors and prostitutes are responsible for the influx of cultism at the grassroot level. Similarly, the rise in unemployment in rural communities and towns propelled the increase in street cultism as indigenous youths saw cultism as an avenue to make money. This is achieved by wrecking havoc in communities through looting shops, engaging in drug trafficking, kidnapping and electoral violence. This lends credence to the fact that, the Nigerian political climate has created a viable means for cultism not only to thrive but get entrenched (Chinnah and Ferdinard, 2019). In essence, cultism is undeniably one of the social vices setting the hand of the developmental clock of Nigeria

backwards. The unchecked atrocities, horrific crimes and brutality of cultists in the Nigerian society has continued to take its toll on the lives of young and old Nigerians. Many innocent individuals have been hacked down in their prime by criminal elements referred to as cultists. More often than not, when there is a clash between two rival cult groups, the cultists strike in a university institution today and a reprisal attack occurs the next day in a community or locality claiming lives and then it becomes an endless chain of mass killings in trying to prove superiority. This depicts their synergy and network of heinous activities in a country already ravaged by poverty, infrastructural decay, corruption, weak political economy, insecurity, underdevelopment, inflation, terrorism, ethnic and religious strife, herdsmen invasion, misery, penury, poor leadership, pervasive illiteracy and squalor (Eneh, 2008). This was expounded by Nnam (2014) who noted that street cultism is an expression and reflection of displeasure and dissatisfaction with the prevailing social order and political arrangements in the environment. Hence, youths resort to the subculture of street cultism as a means of voicing discontent about the widespread miscarriage of justice in the legal system, oppressive and irresponsible leadership and a corrupt socio-political structure of the Nigerian society. Sadly, it is the lower class of Nigerians who were denied of their inalienable rights overtime by the ruling class that become cultists and so the issue here is that when people are deprived of a good standard of living, frustration, rancor, revenge and malignancy are likely to ensue and find expression in an illegitimate means such as cultism. In the light of this, this study seeks to examine the implications of street cultism on the national development of Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### ***Street Cultism***

One of the nefarious scourge facing Nigeria's socio-political environment today is the inveteracy of street cultism that has negatively affected Nigeria's image globally. According to Onyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015) cultism can be defined as a group of people whose membership, admission, policy and initiation formalities as well as their modus operandi are shrouded in secrecy while their malevolent activities have negative effects on both members and non-members. This suggests that even non-members (who are commonly referred to as "Jews" by cultists) suffer the consequences of the unlimited degree of violence and brutishness during assassinations. He further noted that cultism in Nigeria is a byproduct of many decades of military rule and its attendant culture of institutionalized violence. However, they are characterized by night activities, nocturnal initiation ceremonies in which initiates are dehumanized while some die in the process, making blood covenants and performing other occultic rituals, organized oppositions against any kind of oppression, real or imagined, abuse of alcohol and narcotics, intimidation, harassment, use of violence, extortion, stealing, rape, armed robbery, arson, maiming, manslaughter and murder.

This was substantiated by Chinnah and Ferdinard (2019) who further noted that other characteristics include common belief, ideology and violent interests, allegiance are only to members at the expense of parents and relations, interests of members supersedes any other thing, they operate against the rule of law, they employ the use of wanton violence to redress perceived injustice and disrespect done against their members that include mass killings and destruction of properties, they operate like the military. Orders are obeyed without objection or queries, they are a functional organization with rules and regulations. However, aside their

penchant for violence, they also engage in despicable and repulsive acts such as advance fee fraud, consumption of human blood and urine, trigger communal strife, fear and aggression in communities, indulge in orgies, debauchery, sex parties, sexual perversion and all manners of depravity. For Aina (2003) street cultism typifies a group of person who share a common cause and whose mode of meeting and agenda are unknown to the public. Initiation to rank and file is done secretly. Very often they have their paraphernalia, identity, symbols and regalia are worn exclusively by their members. He further stressed that cultism is a group of people of whom nothing is known, heard or seen although something sinister and violent can be felt about them. This was reiterated by Molagun (2006) who observed that cultism is an aberrant, ungodly, barbaric and wicked movement group or organization that grooms members to be a nuisance to the society while protecting its common interests through the use of violence and social upheaval.

### **National Development**

National development encompasses all ideas that attempts to improve the conditions of national existence in all ramifications. This involves the improvement in the material well-being of all citizens in a sustainable way. This reveals that it is the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as the infrastructural advancement of a country or a nation and this is achieved through development planning which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government (Lawal and Oluwatoyin, 2011). This was buttressed by Ekundayo (2015) whp opined that national development can be seen as an encompassing process involving the steady and systemic change in cultural, economic and political spheres of a society in a way that increases production, empowers the people and their communities, protects the environment, strengthens institutions, grows quality of life and promotes good governance. Hence, the focus is on institutional, economic and political development and how the institutions and lives in it can get better. Accordingly, this was amplified by Adekoya and Ajilore (2012) who noted that the concept of national development is a term that refers to the sustainable growth and development of a nation to a more desirable one. Essentially, national development is people-oriented and its success is evaluated in terms of the impact it has had in improving the welfare of the masses. In corroborating this, Njoku and Isigwe (2019) argued that national development involves a sustainable and comprehensive change or transformation in cultural, educational, economic and political fields to enhance the living conditions of the greater majority.

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

Various scholars have highlighted some of the causes of street cultism in Nigeria which include:

1. Absence of Godly and ethical values in Nigeria's socio-political system: That Nigeria has deteriorated morally, ethically and spiritually is evidently clear. Years of military rule left Nigeria with a violent, anarchical and turbulent political culture. Nigeria's culture of integrity, sense of worth, dignity of labor and hardwork suddenly fizzled out and was replaced with rent-seeking mentality which produced a large army of people who believe in dubious ways to succeed. Hence, the younger generation became socialized into a system where hardwork does not pay. The consequence of this systemic breakdown is street cultism which provides the attainment of inordinate ambition without any form of work ethics (Aina, 2003).

2. **Parental Background:** Youths who come from backgrounds where Godly and ethical values and principles of life are not instilled in them from childhood grow up to become bereft of character and therefore become reprobates and deviants. Similarly, parents who over indulge and pamper their wards without enforcing correction and discipline raise youths who become entitled, indulgent and rebellious. Therefore, youths who fall into these two categories tend to imbibe criminally-oriented behaviours which lead them to joining cult groups in order to achieve their personal aim (Haastrup, Ekundayo and Osalusi, 2010).

3. **Economic/Financial Benefits:** Disgruntled youths from broken homes, financially vulnerable families or youths experiencing unemployment and squalor see cultism as an avenue for making money in order to afford basic necessities for living through unscrupulous, deviant and perilous means such as engaging in electoral violence, kidnapping, drug trafficking, prostitution, insurgency, fraudulent activities and other socio-politically harmful activities (Ajitoni and Olaniyan, 2018).

4. **State sponsored violence:** During the military era (1983-1998) state sponsored violence became rife. It was used by the military to harass, kidnap, intimidate or assassinate those who the military government considered threats or perceived enemies. It was also used as deterrence to those who were contemplating resisting or rebelling against the military government. For instance, during the Abacha regime (1993-1998) some perceived opponents of the regime paid the ultimate price with their lives. These people included Alfred Rewane, Kudirat Abiola, the Ogoni nine led by Saro Wiwa and others. In addition, Sergeant Rogers who was one of General Abacha's mark men killed real and imagined enemies of the Abacha regime. All these activities were revealed at the panel headed by Justice Oputa (known as the Oputa Panel) set up by the Goodluck Jonathan administration to look into cases of human rights violations during the Abacha regime. Hence, these were part of the institutionalization of violence which some of the youths learnt and were socialized into. Thus cultism became entrenched in and out of institutions of learning with the support, backing and sponsorship of the military government to kill opponents or rebellious groups within the university premises or within communities eliminated students and locals who they felt were against the government through commando style execution. That was how street cultism grew and became part and parcel of politics (Nnam, 2014).

5. **Ignorance:** Some young locals and indigenes engaging in cult activities claimed to have been deceived by a friend's invitation for a social gathering or party only to get there and be coerced into joining notorious cult groups where they are forced to swear an oath or be killed if they should back out or report to the law enforcement agents (Aina, 2003). Similarly, some ignorant indigenes were lured with empty promises of having access to money, increased employment opportunities and facilitated contact with influential people. These promises were never realized and when the locals discovered they were being deceived, it became extremely difficult for them to leave for fear of being brutally murdered (Wellington, 2007).

## **Types of Street Cultism**

Like campus cults, street cultists also have a connection, network or an extension of campus cultism where they operate in local, state areas, communities as well as residential areas. Students who were rusticated from universities on account of cultism and/or examination malpractices shifted their cult activities or confraternities from the university community to the streets and environs of the state. Similarly, during the era of a Vice-chancellor of River State University (who was a cultist) campus based cultism extended their influence by creating street cultism in order to fight for supremacy and territory through organized violence, banditry, hooliganism and criminality. Therefore, almost all street cultism in Nigeria originated splintered or derived inspiration from the various university confraternities (Wellington, 2007).

In the light of this, there are countless numbers of street cult groups in Nigeria however, some of them will be listed: The Luttons, The Secret Son of Satan, The Red Skins, St Stephens, Daughters of Queen Amina, Musketeers, Blood Brotherhood, Junior Buccaneers, White Angels, Sons of Night, Black Ladies, Black Cross, Bats, J.V, King Cobras, Predators, Scavengers, Debam, Dewell, Black Axe, Black Bra, Black Beret fraternity, Ostrich fraternity, Neo-black movement, Mgba Mgba brothers Maphites, Knight Cadet, Green Beret confraternity, Eiyé confraternity, Daughters of Jezebel, Cappa Vendetta, Black Cats, Buccaneers, Panama, The Scorpion fraternity, The Mafioso fraternity, The Dragons, The Frigates, The Canary, The Amazons, Sunmen, Temple of Eden fraternity, Seadogs, Red Sea Horses, Pyrates confraternity, The Soires fraternity, Black Heart, Amorc, Night Owl, Lucifer Knights, The Dreaded Friend of Friends, White Angels, Vipers, The executioners (Oyemwinmia and Aibieyi, 2015; Aina, 2003; Owonikoko and Ifukor, 2016)

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Frustration Aggression Theory**

The frustration aggression theory was propounded by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, Orval Mowrer and Robert Sears in 1939 and further improved upon by Neal Miller in 1941 and Leonard Berkowitz in 1969 (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer and Sears, 1939; Miller, Neal, 1941; Berkowitz, 1969). According to Akahalu (2014) frustration aggression theory postulates that an obstacle to goal attainment leads to frustration which may then lead to aggression, criminal patterns of behaviours and deviant practices. Essentially, this theory tends to provide justification for behaving aggressively or violently being frustrated aggression, theory is that obstructionism, blockage or hindrance of an actor(s) effort to actualize a goal triggers the aggressive instincts that stimulate the behavioural urge to act violently and destroy the source of the obstruction engendering the frustration. Similarly, the frustration aggression theory explains the rise in street cultism as a consequence of frustration triggered by betrayal of the government to provide jobs after graduation, negligence of government to provide a good standard of living, deprivation to basic necessities of life, discrepancy or the gap between needs, expectations and attainment. Hence, the youths rebel by channeling their internal conflicts and resentment through joining cult groups where their frustrations can be fully expressed in the form of violence, hostility and conflict. Therefore, this theory best explains the reasons for the proliferation of cultism beyond the citadels of learning to the communities and by extension to the society. The failure or inability of the Nigerian government to meet up to expectation, the failure of government to fulfill its manifesto, the failure of government to provide a conducive environment where

employment generation will be increased and poverty, lack, hunger and squalor eradicated and basically the general failure of the state. Drawing from the foregoing, an individual or group's perception of a hostile environment coupled with his pessimism about the realization of goals and the perception or knowledge that the fate of his goals are in the hands of others (ruling class) who do not care about his future explains the increase in barbaric and horrific crimes that choke any effort of development.

### **Implications of Street Cultism Nigeria on National Development**

The repugnant and abhorrent activities of cultism has been consistently antithetical to national development and produced a remarkably debilitating setback on the economic growth of the country (Ada, Esuabana and Anake, 2017). According to Cidi, Mohamed, Khadijatu and Alieu (2007) when there is constant outburst of violence among various cult groups, many lives, corporations, investment, educational, financial institutions and establishments go in for it because consistent blood baths leads to anarchy, social upheaval, famine, tension and a complete breakdown in the socio-political and economic structures that hold a society. The consequence of this epidemic has led to the impunity and increase in viciousness of criminal gangs who have become ready and available instruments for political violence, arson, electoral fraud, militancy, pipeline vandalism particularly in the Niger Delta region and armed conflicts. The resultant effect of this is brain drain, unemployment, poverty, infrastructural breakdown, precarious socio-political environment that sabotages any form or chance of national development (Olojede, 2019), destruction and dent in the international environment, conducive learning environment for advancement and technological development becomes impossible as well as deprivation of the country from raising godly, responsible and ethical leaders (Molagun, 2006). In addition to the mayhem and acid attacks perpetrated by cultists, cultists are also known to raise down properties, companies, industries, and vehicles in trying to target their victims or draw attention to their grievances (Ajitoni and Olaniyan, 2018). Similarly, they destroy university properties and create youth restiveness in the environment. All these actions repel foreign investors from investing in the country thereby denying others the prospects of being employed due to the high level of anarchy they cause. Also, Aina (2003) further stressed that cultism has brought about an increase in the number of drug syndicates, drug lords and drug peddlers because that is where they stem from. He further emphasized that rape and other forms of sexual perversion have assumed mind boggling and dangerous dimensions as both genders are not spared. Hence, the orgy of violence and brutality unleashed in the grassroots has become more appalling. Movement on streets and communities have become a dangerous exercise especially at dark hours because that is the time when cultists see that as an opportunity for rival them to engage in vicious attacks against each other and settle scores. From the activities of cult groups, it is evidently clear that the sanctity of human lives no longer hold weight in addition to the damage it does to Nigeria's image and reputation which invariably affects international relationships as foreign investors are not encouraged to invest in Nigeria or exchange ideas. This unfortunately affects technological advancement. Furthermore, cultism has been identified as one of the factors that induce poverty. This implies that one of the major factors that determine the overall output of an economy is its effectiveness in manpower utilization however, cultism negatively affects the development of the full human resources potential of any economy since the acquisition of skills, knowledge and other forms of human resources development are targets of destruction by cultists (Olojede, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Street cultism is a manifestation of years of institutional corruption, terrible governance, breakdown in the educational institutions, irresponsibility of the ruling class in facilitating a conducive economic environment for economic development to thrive and failure of parents to inculcate godly values in the lives of their children. All these factors become a vicious cycle that makes peace become elusive, creates a precarious environment and choke any form of development, innovation and technological advancement. It cannot be overemphasized that educational and vocational investment or empowerment in the human resources of a society is the fastest way to achieve national development but when there is continuous and repetitive systemic institutional breakdown in the social and economic structures, the rise and impunity of criminal elements who become agents of destruction and anarchy become inevitable.

## **Recommendations**

1. State police has become very essential and inevitable in order to carry out regular and impromptu surveillance in streets, communities and residential areas to fish out criminals and their hideouts in order to create a peaceful and conducive society where development can thrive.
2. The culture of silencing, ignoring, castigating or shunning youths from expressing their thoughts, experiences or challenges to their parents should stop. Parents must of necessity create a home where the child is free and unafraid to share his/her experiences and challenges with his/her parents. The parents must create a loving, peaceful and friendly home environment or ambience for the children where conflict resolution and healthy communication can be taught. That way youth are not negatively influenced or misadvised by peers. Similarly, educators, religious, traditional leaders and caregivers need to create a loving bond with the millennial youths instead of having an autocratic relationship with them. This implies that they must desist from the old African parental pattern of dismissing or seeing youth's feelings and opinions as irrelevant or insignificant. They must ensure that they are positive models and mentors to their mentees. That way they will not see any television idol or entertainer who in some instances could be a cultist as a role model because they have created an avenue where youths can share their burdens with them. This will drastically reduce the influence cultists might have on them.
3. It is high time parents, educators, religious and traditional leaders care about the welfare of the youths and not abandon them to fate after graduation in order not to be lured by criminal elements wherein they see an avenue to transfer their pain and resentment by becoming a nuisance to the society. This can be done by empowering the youths because the fastest way to reduce cultism is to empower the youths so that they do not get deceived into a vicious cycle of crime.
4. Consistent conferences, seminars, town hall meetings as well as public lectures must be organized by the media, academic leaders, traditional, community and religious leaders at the grassroot level on a monthly or daily basis so as to expose the dangers of cultism on the lives and

future of the youth as well as its implications for national and sustainable development in order to sabotage continuous recruitment via deception of cultists.

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