

# **Violence in the Citadel: The Menace of Secret Cults in the Nigerian Universities**

ADEWALE ROTIMI

*Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

## ABSTRACT

Cultism has become a major social problem both within and outside the Nigerian universities. The origin of cultism in the Nigerian universities can be traced to the Pyrates Confraternity that was founded by the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka and others at the University College, Ibadan (now called the University of Ibadan), in 1953. The confraternity which was non-violent and whose activities were never shrouded in secrecy resembled the sororities and fraternities found in many American university campuses. The aims of the Pyrates confraternity were lofty and noble. They wanted an end to tribalism; colonial mentality and they wanted to revive the age of chivalry. Unfortunately towards the end of 1960's, the original aims of the Pyrates Confraternity were abandoned. The confraternity gradually metamorphosed into a secret cult that was later to proliferate into many splinter groups. This change was accelerated by yet other changes taking place both at the universities and the entire Nigerian society. The changes observable in the Nigerian society included violent military coups, state, sponsored political assassinations proliferation of ethnic militia, communal clashes and total erosion of the traditional family values. Changes occurring within the universities included overcrowding, under funding, deteriorated infrastructure and lack of virile students union activities.

The emergency of secret cultism has been characterized by some bizarre and violent activities which include, physical torture as a means of initiating new members, maiming and killing of rival cult members and elimination of real and perceived enemies.

To effectively combat secret cultism, the universities must enjoy improved funding, recreational academic facilities must be improved and virile students union activities must be encouraged. For the general Nigerian society, the present culture of violence in the society must be curtailed.

## INTRODUCTION

All over the world, universities have often been regarded and referred to as “citadels of learning”. This also applied to the Nigerian universities until recently, when as a result of incessant secret cult activities, the centres of learning have become “centres of violence”. Indeed, Gimba (2002) in referring to the cult activities in the universities referred to the universities as offering “BSc” in violence and “MA” in cultism. As has been observed by Eneji (1996) almost every passing day, there are new stories of devilish acts perpetrated by secret cults on campuses.

In describing the situation of cultism Eneji (1996) asserts,  
“From the universities to the polytechnics, colleges of education and other tertiary institutions and some secondary schools, come stories of violence,

torture and unwarranted intimidation executed by members of secret cults.”

Common observation reveals that many Nigerian newspapers and magazines have become “bulletin boards” for reporting the daily exploits of members of secret cults. Unfortunately, despite all efforts to tackle the problem, secret cult activities in the Nigerian institutions of learning have defied all solutions. Those solutions proffered so far are like putting out an inferno without any proper attempt made to identify the sources of the inferno’s fuel. This paper attempts to identify those conditions that stimulate and promote cultism in Nigeria’s institutions of higher learning, most especially, the universities.

This paper examines the problem of secret cults in the Nigerian universities in a multi-layered manner. In order not to lose focus, we start from the kernel of the problem, which is secret cults. We then move outwards and discuss the changes, occurring in the educational sector, which have some bearing on the emergence and proliferation of secret cults. This is followed by the analysis of those changes which have taken place within the society generally and which also have some bearing on the problem of secret cults. In other words, it will be a “bottom-up” analysis.

This paper is divided into several parts. It starts with the definition of a secret cult, followed by the history of secret cult in the higher institution of learning in Nigeria. The next part addresses the reasons why students join secret cults as well as modes of recruitment into secret cults. The third part attempts to examine the emergence of secret cults from the perspectives of those changes taking place within and outside the universities. The last part of the paper deals with discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

## WHAT IS A SECRET CULT?

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology (1996) gives the anthropological definition of a “cult” as “a set of practices and beliefs of a group in relation to a local god”. It also gives a sociological definition of it as a small group or religious activists whose beliefs are typically secrete, esoteric and individualistic. Ogunbameru (1997) defines a secret cult as an organization whose activities are kept away from the knowledge of others. These activities are essentially covert, disguised and are usually carried out behind closed doors (Aguda 1997). From the foregoing definitions it is safe to define a secret cult as a group of people whose activities are carried out in exclusive locations and unusual times without being exposed to the uninitiated.

## HISTORY OF SECRET CULTISM IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

The secret cult phenomenon is not new in Africa. As Aguda (1997) has observed, activities of secret cults like, Human leopards and Human crocodiles, have been recorded in Central Africa. In Nigeria, secret cults have always existed in many parts of the country. Among the Yorubas of the Southwest can be found the **Ogboni Secret Cult**. Among the Efiks of the Southeastern part of Nigeria can be found the **Ekpe Secret Cult** (Adelola 1997). The **Ekine Cult** is to be found in the Delta region, the Edo of the Midwest have the **Owegbe Cult**, just to mention a few. Membership of these secret cults provides sources of status, economic, social and political security, to their adherents.

The origin of the secret cults in the Nigerian universities can be traced back to the **Pirates Confraternity**, also known as **National Association of Sea Dogs**, that was founded at the University College, Ibadan (now called the University of Ibadan), in 1953 when the institution was still a satellite campus of the University of London. It has the skull and crossbones as its logo.

The Seadog Confraternity was similar to the numerous fraternities and sororities, which are so ubiquitous in many American universities and colleges both in membership requirements and activities. In the United States, the fraternities and sororities are sometimes called **Greek Clubs** because of their Greek names and symbols. These Greek clubs promote, among other things, moral uprightness, patriotism, community service and high academic and intellectual standards.

The Pirates Confraternity at the University College, Ibadan, was formed by the first African Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka and a few others popularly known as **G7**. The original aims of the association were very lofty and noble. They aimed at producing future Nigerian leaders who would be very proud of their African heritage. Thus, the Pirates Confraternity aimed at abolishing convention (Thomas 2002). It also wanted to revive the age of chivalry. As Thomas further asserts, the Confraternity boasted of the cleanest, the brightest and the most politically conscious among the students.

The main objectives of the seadogs have been summarized by Orintusin (1990). They are as follows; (i) to fight non-violently but intellectually and effectively, against the imposition of foreign conventions, to revive the age of chivalry, (ii) to find a lasting solution to the problems of tribalism and elitism. Professor Wole Soyinka was the first democratically elected “captain” of the society with the name, Captain blood (Orintusin 1990). Professor Muiyiwa Awe was **Long John Silver**. Many prominent Nigerians who were founding fathers of the Confraternity include Pius Oleghe, Ralph Opara Aig I’Moukhuede and others. The outfit of the seadogs resembled those of the pirates of the old. Everything done was healthy, fun and harmless (Orintusin 1990). Professor Soyinka (2002) comments that the pirates wanted to be different from the “stodgy establishment and its pretentious products in a new educational institution different from a

culture of hypocritical and affluent middleclass, different from alienated colonial aristocrats”.

Professor Soyinka also explained that confraternities are not cults (Dixon 1994). According to him, Confraternity was part of the social life of the university, which existed then, and as Adebayo (2001) has pointed out some evil minds have twisted the original aims of this noble tradition that was simply one of campus life. Soyinka further points out that the original Confraternity did not swear any oath of secrecy, no binding of blood and the identities of members were known to both students and staff (Adiamoh 2003).

Long after the founding fathers had left the University of Ibadan, the Confraternity (seadogs) continued to thrive. Unfortunately towards the end of the 1960's, the social, political and educational changes which were occurring in Nigeria began to affect the operations of the Confraternities. According to Adelola (1997), the first notable departure came in 1968 with the formation of the **Eiye Confraternity** at the University of Ibadan. According to Owoeye (1997) the Eiye Confraternity had sprung from the “Bucaneers” which also had sprung up from the sea dogs. The major force that led to the formation of new splinter groups from the sea dogs was basically doctrinal (Thomas 2002). For example, members of the new groups were not able to meet the high academic standard originally set by the sea dogs Confraternity.

The nascent groups which were formed from the sea dogs regarded the pirates as rather elitist whose campaigns had outlived their usefulness (Owoeye 1997). The protestant groups which sprang up from the Pyrates Confraternity included, Black eye, Vikings, Bucaneers, Mafia, dragons, Black Beret and others. The female cults include, Temple of Eden, Frigates, Barracudas, Daughters of Jezebel and others. Today in Nigeria, there is hardly any tertiary institution which has not suffered the adverse effects of the activities of secret cults which have been characterized by violence.

## REASONS FOR JOINING CULTIST GROUPS

Students are attracted to cultist groups for a variety of reasons. Generally the social atmosphere prevailing in the Nigerian universities provides an inspiring environment for secret cults to thrive. These may include, lack of virile student unionism, erosion of the traditional academic culture, absence of intellectual debates and all other activities that are components of traditional campus culture.

Those who eventually enlist in secret cult groups might have been compelled to do so because of “sagging egos” that need to be boosted. Others join in order to have a sense of belonging and the need to be well “connected” (Eneji 1996). Still others may join because of the need for financial assistance, to secure girl friends or for self protection (Ogunbameru 1997). Some students are also attracted to cultist groups because they are seeking after meaning, direction, comfort and love (Omotunde 1984). Secret cultism seems to have special attraction for youths who

are emotionally disturbed and distressed. As Omotunde has further observed, recruitment into a secret cultist group is “dressed” up like a Japanese meal with “affection”, “understanding” and “love” which easily attract the already vulnerable to the fold.

The youths, especially those from broken homes, destitutes and youngsters who have flexible minds easily fall prey to the entreaties from cult members (Omotunde 1984). Youngsters who are lonely, depressed, dejected, disorientated and frightened sometimes drift into the waiting arms of secret cultists. Apart from the categories mentioned above there are some youngsters who join secret cults out of sheer curiosity. As Eneji (1996) has observed, those who are tall, masculine and naturally tacit and those who consciously limit much interaction with other students are easy preys for those recruitment “officers”.

## MODES OF OPERATION

For the purposes of this paper, modes of operation will include recruitment, initiation and some specific activities carried out by those who have been recruited and initiated.

## RECRUITMENT

A very important element in the mode of operation of secret cults is recruitment. Like any other social organization, recruitment must occur so that membership which might be lost through graduation, rustication, or even death, must be replenished. Recruitment exercise is closely tied to the willingness of students to become members of secret cults. Apart from some physical and emotional attributes which have been referred to earlier, prospective cult members must demonstrate the ability to use weapons, while ability to consume alcohol and use drugs are added advantages. New recruits must also demonstrate some stoic abilities, especially, ability to bear pain.

For the prospective female cultists, wearing of provocative dresses that accentuate natural curves and contours is almost a must (Brown 1999). They must also be able to display an unusual bravado during altercations with uninitiated female students. Some of the most popular female secret cults are, Black braziers, Amazons, Jezebels, White pants, just to name a few. A prospective female cultist, according to Okwe (2002) must be a smoker of all brands of cigarettes, she must be able to consume all kinds of alcohol, she must be familiar with and, if possible, possess a pistol or an axe. She must also be rich, bold and have very “big” men friends. To guarantee her acceptance, she must pass the torture test. Being a lesbian is an added advantage. She must also cultivate the habit of wearing jeans

(Okwe 2002). She must possess a wardrobe of weird attires that can make heads turn whenever she passes by.

To the psychologically distressed, secret cults offer succour (Omotunde 1984). The succour is in form of love, affection and some degree of emotional security.

Students who are sought after by secret cults vary in social backgrounds. They might be children of professors, judges, politicians, senior police officers and so on. The status of their parents in society guarantees them some protection from the claws of law enforcement agents in the event that they get into trouble. Initiation naturally follows recruitment.

## INITIATION

The initiation process commences immediately after new recruits have been thoroughly screened. The first step in the initiation process is swearing an oath of allegiance and secrecy. As Thomas (2002) has observed, during an initiation ceremony, the eyes of the initiate are expected to be closed while some incantations are recited. New entrants are subjected to thorough beating as a means of toughening them and testing their endurance for pain.

On the initiation day, the new entrants are made to drink some concoctions mixed with blood (Thomas 2002). Sometimes they are given some tough assignments like raping a very popular female student or a female member of the university staff. For the female cultists, their initiation may include being forced to engage in some immoral activities. Brown (1999) has observed that, among the Jezebels and Amazons for example, new entrants may be made to undergo six rounds of rigorous intercourse in quick successions. They may also be made to fight with other girls or strong boys. They may also be subjected to thorough flogging. New entrants are expected to move around in groups of four or five as a means of protecting themselves against possible sexual harassment. During the initiation new members are taught to communicate with other members in coded language. Having been recruited and initiated, cult members are expected to engage in many activities, which form parts of the group norm.

## VARIOUS ACTIVITIES OF SECRET CULT MEMBERS

Although the history of cultism on the university campuses in Nigeria dates back to some fifty years, its involvement in violence became manifest only some two decades ago. Akinbami (1991) has observed, for example, that the Confraternity from which the present secret cults developed performed some significantly useful services on the university campuses during the 1960's and 1970's. For example, members of Confraternities formed the inner caucus that determined, who, among

the students, occupied what positions in the student union government. It was not uncommon for Confraternity members to assiduously work for the removal of student union executives who performed below expectation.

On different campuses across the country, cults were in the forefront of promoting law and order. Akinbami (1991) has indeed observed that in the 1960's and 1970's, the University of Lagos employed the services of the Panama Confraternity to usher in distinguished visitors who came to the campus. For example, the Pan African Black axe confraternity normally commemorated the murder of anti-apartheid students who were murdered in Sharpeville, South Africa.

Unfortunately, however, from the beginning of the 1980's, the activities of Confraternities became virulently violent and secrecy became their ways of life. Their activities included "dealing" with any non-members who snatched a member's girl friend or "sugar daddy" (in case of female cultists). Their activities also included "settling" lecturers in cash or kind (Okwe 2002). Female cultists began to operate prostitution rings and having their photographs displayed in popular hotels. From this period on, secret cults sprang up in the country like mushrooms with their activities assuming more devastating and dangerous proportions. They became nightmares to the general student communities, parents and successive military and civilian administrations.

It is almost impossible to accurately and empirically document the amount of crime resulting from secret cult activities. In Nigeria, the police remains the major source of crime data. Unfortunately, the police records do not indicate which crimes specifically result from secret cult activities. Consequently, possible crimes resulting from secret cult activities are diffused among such crimes as rape, manslaughter, arson and others.

According to the criminal code, to be successfully accused of secret cultism it is required that the offender be caught wearing full secret cult regalia. This is not possible because most of the secret cult activities take place at night under the cover of darkness in unusual places. Also, for about two decades now, policemen have been banned from operating on the university campuses in Nigeria. It is to be noted that former secret cult members hardly come out to share their experiences as cult members with the general public for fear of reprisals from members who are still active. Consequently, data on secret cult activities in Nigeria must be teased out of newspaper reports, magazines and occasionally from anonymous personal anecdotes. An examination of some random reports which throw some light on the extent of violent activities of secret cults in the Nigerian universities is now presented.

One of the earliest reported secret cult violence occurred at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1985 when a non-cult student incurred the wrath of another student, who was a cult leader, for "snatching" the latter's girlfriend (Akor 1994). It was also reported by Eneji (1996) that sometimes in 1991 a student at the University of Port Harcourt was beheaded during a feud between cult members. In 1993, fifteen students of the University of Port Harcourt were jailed for terms

varying from five to thirty years for belonging to secret cults. They were jailed by the miscellaneous offences tribunal which sat at Enugu, Anambra State in Eastern Nigeria (**Daily Times**, 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan, 1993, p. 7).

Another report was of Ambrose Alli University. Also at Delta State University in Abraka, the activities of secret cult groups resulted in the death of a Principal Assistant Registrar and his wife. Two secret cult groups – the Black axe and the Bucaneers were engaged in what appeared like an all-out war.

On 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1999, armed cultists stormed a male hostel at Obafemi Awolowo University brutally murdering five students. Many pages of the **Nigerian Tribune** of 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1999 were devoted to the extensive reporting of the event.

Again, Olubusuyi (2002) reported that the students of Delta State University in Abraka, carried out a massive destruction of some parts of the campus on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2002. The Vice Chancellor's lodge was burnt in the process, so also was the department of linguistic building. On 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2002 a 300 level economics student was shot and slaughtered at the Dalimore area of Ado-Ekiti, the Capital City of Ekiti State. Koleoso (2002) traced the source of the crime to cultists. Incidentally the slain student was the only child of his parents.

At the University of Jos in Plateau State, Shobayo (2002) reported that two undergraduates were callously shot dead while they were deeply asleep. This happened when some cultist groups were engaged in a battle of supremacy during the miss "Unijos" competition.

In Edo State, Ayodele (2003) reported that some criminals suspected to be cultists set a house ablaze at 32 Omokaro Street, Benin City when the cultists, after ransacking the house could not find the people they were looking for. To put the problem of secret cultism in proper perspective, it is necessary to examine into details, the general decay in the education sector and the state of anomie which has been pervasive in Nigeria in the past two decades. This will help in properly understanding the problem of secret cultism in our universities.

## SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

In the past two decades, many dramatic changes have taken place in the Nigerian Society generally and in the education sector in particular. The changes are so intertwined and interwoven that they can only be separated for analytical purposes.

## SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR AND THEIR EFFECTS ON SECRET CULTISM

In the past three decades, some drastic changes have been observed in the education sector. These changes have, in turn, impacted on the growth and spread

of secret cult activities in the universities. Among these are, demographic changes, falling standard of education, reduced and inadequate funding, disintegration of infrastructure and the emergence of culture of violence in our universities.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

For a proper and meaningful discussion on the demographic changes which have occurred in the Nigerian universities, it is necessary to step back a little and examine the situations in both primary and secondary schools which produce students who eventually become undergraduates. For example, the age at which pupils leave secondary school, the type of socialization that takes place of violence has been firmly entrenched, since the first military coup of 1966; cultism can be viewed as an extension of the culture of violence, which is so visible and prevalent in the Nigerian Society. Indeed, the university campuses are a microcosm of the Nigerian Society.

The culture of violence, which has become entrenched in the Nigerian Society, has many elements or components. They include, series of military coups, state sponsored violence, political assassinations, activities of ethnic militia and communal clashes. These have been accelerated by the breakdown of the traditional family structures.

## MILITARY COUPS

Detailed analysis of military coups which took place in Nigeria between 1966 and 1983 is beyond the scope of the work. Suffice it to say, however, that the emergence of military coups in the Nigerian body politics also marked the official introduction of violence as a way of resolving political conflicts.

The first military coup in Nigeria took place on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966. In this coup many top politicians, especially those from the then Northern and Western Regions were murdered in cold blood. This first coup introduced the first institutionalized violence into the Nigerian politics. In July 1967, there was yet, another coup in which many senior military officers (including the then head of state) were violently eliminated. This was to be followed by the civil of which lasted for three years (1967–1970). For the first time in the history of Nigeria, dead bodies of Nigerians were seen lying and decaying by the roadside. By the civil war, violence became permanently pressed into the psyche of an average Nigerian. The civil war also introduced Nigerians to the use of deadly and sophisticated weapons like handguns, machine guns, assault rifles and so on. In February 1976 there was another coup in which General Murtala Mohammed, the then head of state was brutally murdered. Other coups which took place in 1983,

1985 and 1993 did not involve violence. However, there were some attempted or unsuccessful coups which took place in 1976, and 1990. In each case, coup plotters were tried in military style and they were publicly executed by firing squads. Military administrations employed violence to cow and subdue any possible opposition and consolidate their hold on power.

## STATE SPONSORED VIOLENCE AND CULTISM

During the military interregnum of 1983–1998, state sponsored violence became popular. Again, it was used by the military to victimize those whom the government considered their enemies. It was also used as deterrence to those who might be contemplating some opposition to the military government.

In October 1986, a foremost journalist was murdered through a letter bomb. During the Abacha regime (1993–1998) some perceived opponents of the regime paid dearly with their lives. These people included Alfred Rewane, Kudirat Abiola, the Ogoni “nine” led by Saro Wiwa and others. Agekameh (1999) gave a detailed account of one now “Sergeant Rogers” who was one of General Abacha’s marksmen and snuffed life out of real and imagined enemies of the Abacha regime. All these activities were revealed at the panel headed by Justice Oputa (known as Oputa Panel) which was set up by the present administration to look into cases of human rights violation during the Abacha regime. Accounts of cultists who eliminated fellow students through commando style execution can be regarded as part and parcel of the culture of violence prevalence during the Abacha period. It is now necessary to examine political assassinations.

## POLITICAL ASSASSINATION AND CULTISM

In Nigeria, holding a political office still remains the shortest route to wealth. Consequently, competition for any political office is a cut throat affair among political combatants. In many cases, opponents who are perceived to be difficult to defeat through the ballot box are usually marked down for elimination through the barrels of the gun. Although this practice was introduced during the military regimes, it has survived and in fact gained momentum during the current experiment in democracy in Nigeria. Oyewole (2003) has chronicled the activities of the recent political assassinations in the country.

In February, 1992, the Chairman of the Oredo local government in Edo State was assassinated. Also in March 1992, one Lawrence Nwako, a member of the Abia State House of Assembly was killed, a few meters from his home. Also Barnabas Igwe, the erstwhile chairman of the Onitsha (Anambra State) branch of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA). The list includes Dele Arojo who was a Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) gubernatorial aspirant for Ogun State. In Yobe

State, Adamu Waziri, also a PDP stalwart was assassinated. In the Osun State, Odunayo Olagbaju, a member of the State House of Assembly, was murdered in 2001. The series of political assassinations culminated in the cold-blooded murder of Chief Bola Ige, a prominent Nigerian politician and the Attorney General. Due to the high rate of armed robbery in the country, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a case of armed robbery and a genuine case of political assassination. Added to atmosphere of violence are the activities of ethnic militia which have sprung up in many parts of the country. Cultists take cues from these events.

## ETHNIC MILITIA

Complicating the security situation in the country and contributing to the entrenchment of the culture of violence are the ethnic militia which dot the whole country. Ethnic militia are paramilitary groups who have sprung up in many parts of the country as a response to the general feeling of insecurity and lack of confidence in the police which pervades Nigeria. Each group promotes the cause of its own ethnic group.

In the southwestern part of Nigeria is the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) which champions the cause of the Yorubas. In the Southeast championing the course of the Igbo race are, the Bakassi Vigilante group (known as the Bakassi Boys) and Massob (Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra). In the northern part of the country is the Arewa Youth Forum that caters for the interest of the Hausa/Fulani. In the Niger Delta are the restive Ijaw Youths and the Egbesu boys. On many occasions, these ethnic militia who are usually armed with very sophisticated weapons usually engage the police in violent confrontations in which many lives are lost. Some examples are sketched below.

In October 2001, trouble erupted in Benue State where ethnic militia slaughtered 19 soldiers during a communal clash between the Tiv and Jukum ethnic groups. Later, the soldiers were to revenge the killing of their colleagues by completely sacking Zaki-Biam community (Owolabi 2001a). Earlier in 2000, some belligerent youths in Odi, Bayelsa State had in a similar manner slaughtered 12 policemen who were sent to the area to keep the peace. Later, soldiers were sent to Odi and the entire community was violently destroyed and many casualties were recorded.

In the **Nigerian Tribune** of 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2003, some Ijaw Youths burnt down an entire Itsekiri community of Madangho and the Esravos Beach flow station. They also burnt down Eghoro, Ogheye and Ajudembo communities, forum Shell Petroleum Company to close down its flow station. In another report by the **Nigerian Tribune** (16<sup>th</sup> April, 2003) members of MASSOB clashed with the police at Umulolo in the southeastern part of the country.

It is safe to assume that the activities of these ethnic militia provide inspiration to cultists in the universities. Indeed, clashes between rival cultist groups resemble those which take place between the police and the militia. Recently, the Nigerian President was forced to give a directive to the law enforcement agents that all centrally organised vigilante groups throughout the federation should be dismantled (Mbah 2002: 3). According to the President, they constituted a danger to the elections which were billed to take place in 2003.

The proliferation of ethnic militia seems to have aggravated the problem of communal clashes. In the past three years, some of the most devastating incidents have been observed in the Niger Delta (see Niboro 1990; James 2003; Adeyemo 2003). In the middle Delta region Onyia (2001) has reported communal clashes. Other examples are found in Osun State where Ife and Modakeke communities have intermittently engaged in internecine clashes.

## RELIGIOUS CLASHES

A virile component of the new culture of violence is, religious clashes, mostly between some Moslem fanatics and Christians. Owolabi (2001b) has reported that on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2001 in Kano, in the northern part of Nigeria some Hizba Moslem fanatics who claimed that they were protesting the American Bombing of Afghanistan, set some church buildings on fire and swooped on some Christians. Also in Bauchi State, specifically in Balewa and Borugo Local Government areas, ten Christians were reportedly killed by Moslem fanatics. Other incidents have occurred in Jos, Kaduna and in other parts of Northern Nigeria.

Common observation reveals that students take cues from the situations described above. As Gimba (2002) has observed university students and graduate earn so much money by taking part in crime-related services and contracts which their real graduate certificates would not fetch them. As mentioned earlier, the spawning ground for violence-related activities are also to be found in cult-related activities. Apart from the violent environment to which students have been exposed, the modern family has failed woefully in deflecting or neutralising peer group influences which may involve cultist activities.

## EROSION OF FAMILY INFLUENCE AND SECRET CULTISM

In modern Nigeria the family influence has greatly receded, thus the average family has failed in its function to provide a solid moral foundation for children. Consequently, children are weakly prepared to resist negative peer group influences which they daily encounter in their interaction with others.

Commenting on the activities of “area” boys and girls – a subcultural deviant group of young boys and girls in urban centres in Nigeria – Rafiu (1993) has observed the inability of the modern family to equip the children with effective

socialization to conform to acceptable cultural norms. He further comments by focusing on mothers.

“They (women) are contented with sending them (children) to lesson teachers when the school hours are over. Thus robbing them of the opportunities to be genuine children with time to play, mix with nature and be creative”

He further indicts mothers for the children’s loss of touch with nature:

“No time to run after lizard, no time to swim to their hearts content. No time to play hide and seek game with their dogs in the nearby bush – Indeed, there is no bush, there is no river. There are no plants to provide habitation for lizards. Every time, it is school, it is special coaching and lesson to face the powerful JAMB (Joint Admissions Matriculation Board) examination to universities.”

Rafiu (1993) concludes that, with the lack of contact with nature in a jungle of concrete that is negative and primitive proof of affluence in our society, the children become soulless. They lack moral instructions both at school and at home. Thus, with the bottom of the society not being able to hold, deviant children are produced. Because they are soulless, they become blood thirsty monsters who prowl our streets and campuses at night, terrorizing innocent people. Owoeye (1997) has established strong links between weak and defective family background and influence and tendencies for students to join secret cults. For example, parents themselves might be members of secret cults. Cult members may come from broken homes or homes where child abuse and neglect are very rampant.

## MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE SECRET CULT PHENOMENON

Over the past two decades various attempts have been made to deal with the problem of secret cultism. These attempts have included passing appropriate decrees and enacting legislations deemed appropriate to stamp out secret cults. Others include, establishment of appropriate regulations by university authorities, improvement of infrastructure, and, lately, appeal by various religious groups for divine intervention.

One of the earliest official attempts aimed at curtailing the menace of secret cult activities was the enactment of Decree 47 of 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1989. It is entitled *Students Union Activities* (control and regulations), Decree of 1989. The decree, which was introduced by the General Babangida military administration empowered the governing council of each university to proscribe any society operating within the campus, pursuing activities which are not in the interest of national security, public safety, order, morality and health. Although, this decree

was aimed at curtailing the activities of “recalcitrant” students, it did little to curtail secret cultism. Rather, it drove the activities of secret cults underground.

More recently, the House of Representatives passed a more comprehensive Bill which was aimed at dealing more effectively with secret cultism on the campuses of tertiary institution throughout the country.

More recently, the House of Representatives passed a more comprehensive Bill which was aimed at dealing more effectively with secret cultism on the campuses of tertiary institution throughout the country.

The Bill mentioned above stipulates a jail term of five years or N 250,000 (two hundred and fifty thousand Naira) fine or both for students convicted of participating in secret cult activities (Oladeji & Ojewuyi 2001). The Bill seemed to have borrowed a leaf from the Decree 47 of 1989 mentioned earlier. For example, clause 5 of the Bill States that,

“No cult or society by whatever name called or known shall pursue activities which are,

- (a) not in the interest of nation security, public safety, public order, morality and public health and
- (b) illegal, inimical, destructure or unlawful.”

Apart from enacting legislations, some state governments also formed intelligence units, which, during the military interregnum worked very closely with different tertiary institutions to fish out suspected cult members. Such activities have, occasionally yielded results. For example, in the **Guardian** of 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1994, it was reported that suspected cult members were caught in then Ondo State. It was also reported by Owoeye (1997) that the Eastern zone of the Miscellaneous Offences tribunal sitting at Enugu in January, 1993, jailed 15 students of the University of Port Harcourt for being members of secret cults. The sentences ranged from five to thirty five years with no option of fine.

Some universities have introduced some clauses in the Matriculation oaths where students would pledge not to be members of secret cults. Eneji (1996) has also observed that, in some universities, students are mandated to take an oath before a law court, pledging to be of good behaviour and abiding by a code of conduct, including abstinence from secret cult activities.

Also, during the military era of 1990’s, the military government of the then Oyo State abolished the boarding house system as it believed that such a facility made it easy for students to congregate at night to take part in cult activities.

In many universities, those caught engaged in cult activities are either rusticated or expelled (Awe 2001). Some universities have undertaken the improvement of recreational activities. Umanah (2002) asserts that President Obasanjo gave money to various universities for the improvement of sporting activities and for repair of various infrastructures.

In Lagos, the Commissioner of Police has suggested that those students who have been caught engaging in cult activities should be banned from being members of professional bodies. In some campuses, students have formed

volunteer groups whose main objectives are to fight cultism. Olayeni (2002) has observed this practice at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Following suit, the students of Lagos State University have publicly declared war on secret cultism.

Recently, appeals have been made for divine intervention in fighting secret cultism. Efunuga (2003) reports that, having exhausted all legal and other earthly means to curb the menace of secret cultists, the authorities of Moshood Abiola Polytechnic in Ogun State organized a retreat where both Muslim and Christians prayed fervently for the final and complete eradication of secret cultism on campuses. They specifically prayed to God to deliver, both the institution and the general community from evil gang up and blood letting (Efunuga 2003).

## DISCUSSION

Secret cult activities in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria, today have become a major social problem. This problem, however, is a symptomatic of a society in a state of anomie. It is also an indication of other security problems simmering in the inner core of the society.

Clearly, the problem of secret cultism is a by-product of many decades of military rule in Nigeria and its attendant culture of institutionalized violence. Indeed the onset of military rule in Nigeria seemed to have coincided with the metamorphosis of the original Pyrates Confraternity to secret cults. The transformation was to result in the proliferation of many variants of secret cults.

It has been asserted by Thomas (2002) for example, that Confraternities operated at no degree of violence when they emerged in the 1950's. Unfortunately, they were later to be high jacked by military governments who were anxious to consolidate their holds on university students who might challenge their authorities. For example, virile student unionism was perceived by military authorities as a threat to their power consolidation. Consequently, secret cults were used to "neutralize" student unions and their "anti-government activities"; especially those which questioned or challenged the authorities of military dictatorship. Consequently, what started as a club of some socially conscious students, who chose to be "different" has become club of blood thirsty and blood sucking monsters who parade themselves as students.

The culture of violence was further demonstrated by military coups where perceived and real opponents were eliminated in cold blood. Also political assassination, ethnic violence, religious fanaticism, communal clashes became permanent features of social life. The military juntas seemed to condone these acts of violence since they diverted the attention of citizens from bad governance.

It has been observed by Thomas (2002) that cultist groups enjoyed subtle supports and patronage from both government and school authorities. Cult members were sometimes used by politicians for revenge and for settling personal scores. Indeed, in some cases, past members who had migrated to foreign

countries sometimes remit some money home to support their former cult groups. Politicians who found in cult members ready tools, supplied them with weapons and funds (Thomas 2002). It has also been asserted that, after graduation, some cult graduates secure jobs as bodyguards to some politicians. Because of the connection of cult members with some powerful politicians, it has sometimes become difficult for suspected cult members to be successfully apprehended and prosecuted.

Some situations within the universities seem to have provided a fertile ground for secret cultism. These include, reduced funding, inadequate recreational facilities, idleness, contempt for intellectual culture and distaste for enlightened debate and easy access to sophisticated weapons. All these have conspired and fused together to undermine any serious attempts to eradicate cultism. In short, a disorganized and anomic Nigerian Society has produced highly disorganized individuals as manifested in secret cult membership.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As mentioned earlier, the problem of cultism is a symptom of society which has undergone total moral decadence and where institutionalized and personal violence has become a way of life. Where brute force has supplanted vigorous intellectual debate and with a conspicuous absence of dialogue as a veritable element of conflict resolution. Nigeria is a society where more money is yearly allocated to “defence”, to the detriment of social, welfare for citizens and education. To successfully combat the problem of secret cults, some changes must occur both in the general society and within educational institutions.

General education of the citizens on the corrosive effects of secret cultism must occur. Consequently, churches, mosques, school administrators and the society at large must fuse efforts to combat cultism.

It is very necessary and urgent for the Committee of Vice Chancellors of the Nigerian universities to adopt a common and uniform approach to solving the problem of cultism. (Sanni et al. 1994). This approach will involve thoroughly investigating and finding root causes of the problem. It will also involve strengthening administrative powers to eliminate the scourge from the campus.

It is necessary to reactivate, strengthen and reinvigorate different student unions which will accommodate the interests of all students. According to Awe (2001), cultists are usually found among non-union members. Also, the issue of former cultists who sometimes return to universities as staff must be thoroughly investigated.

Also, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) must be encouraged to channel their energies into virile students activism, the type that encourages healthy intellectual debate and argument on issues that affect them and the society at large. As observed by Gimba (2002) student unions must be

incubators of civilized values, decency and cultural larvae. More emphasis must be placed on character building, responsible leadership and citizenship.

Incidentally, Nigeria, after wandering in a political wilderness for almost four decades, seems to have finally found her bearing. Under the current democratic dispensation, efforts must be made to strengthen the police and law enforcement agents to assure citizens of total security of life and property.

It is also hoped that the government will improve the funding of the education sector so that the universities again will return to their former glory where they will remain centres for debate of excellence. For all these to occur, the Nigerian government needs to have a moratorium on education. This will include a very thorough and objective examination of funding, admission policy and the general welfare of students and staff.

Finally, although this work has focused mainly on cultism in the universities, it must be pointed out, that cult activities are also to be observed in polytechnics and colleges of education. Occasionally, it has even been reported that the scourge has even extended to secondary schools.

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