

Curbing the Menace of Cultism and Youth Violence in Rivers State.

Charles Chukwurah Mezie-Okoye,^{PhD}

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Onyinyechukwu Nkem Durueke,^{PhD}

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

This study focused on “Curbing the menace of cultism and youth violence in Rivers State”. There has been a constant quest for a stop on cultism and youth violence in recent times in Rivers State. Law-abiding residents of Rivers State are constantly living in fear as reports of various dimensions of attacks greet them daily. Many households in the state in recent times have lost loved ones, while others are lucky to be in hospital beds having sustained injuries after various raids of communities by hoodlums. It was against this background that this paper x-rayed the possible causes and consequences of cultism in Rivers State. The major causes of cultism and youth violence in the state are traced to negative parenting, peer pressure, societal decadence, lack of sporting activities, the militarization of the Nigerian polity as well as media influence. Today many people are leaving the state for other states because of the insecurity in the state. The government, if you ask me, is not proactive in dealing with the issue at hand. I, therefore, recommend that all the stakeholders in the state, government, traditional rulers, CDC Chairmen, women leaders should come together to combat cultism and youth violence in the state. The stakeholders should be more aggressive in their quest to eradicate these societal ills before Rivers State will become a ghost state.

KEYWORDS: Cult, Cultism, Youth, Unemployment, Poverty, Sports

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cultism in Nigeria and Rivers State did not come as a result of the activities of certain extra-mundane forces, reminiscent of the Hegelian absolute spirit, but as a result of the irreconcilable contradictions and decay of the Nigerian society rooted in its skewed, dependent, crude, directionless and collapsed economy. It is also important to note that, the Nigerian economy has for years been exposed to perpetual weakness in addressing the problems of the populace. This is acutely compounded by the primitivism and naivety of the ruling class in their relationship to accumulation, production, governance, moral scruple and ethical standard. This has left the society open to external and internal pressures as people struggle in whatever manner to survive and reproduce themselves [1].(Akani, 1996:7-8). It is against this hopeless and dilapidated economic condition bereft of decorum that cultism emerged.

The avowed aim of every cult is to dominate its immediate environment and make life uncomfortable for rival groups to exist. Cultism is not only present in Port Harcourt Town and communities but also in our universities and polytechnics as well as colleges of education. Their methods of operation are the same whether those in the tertiary institutions or outside. Any critical opposition is summarily dealt with.

Law-abiding residents of Rivers State are constantly living in fear as reports of various dimensions of attacks greet them daily. Many households in the state in recent times have lost loved ones, while others are lucky to be in hospital beds having sustained injuries after various raids of communities by hoodlums. No one can predict the next victim to be added to the growing list of casualties. Business owners in the state now close early, travellers avoid evening or night travels, while night life has drastically ebbed [2]. (Punch, May 5, 2019).

The question on everybody’s lips is what is the cause of this sudden increase in the activities of cultism and wanton destruction of lives in the state? In all the foregoing, what is particularly disturbing is that the authorities seem bewildered in tackling the endemic problems of cult wars. While no plausible explanations have been provided, most people believe that the fact that there are no convictions for such crimes encourage many young people into it. And if this persists, Nigerians may have to brace up for more gang violence.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rivers State is one of the oils producing states of Nigeria where lives and properties should be safe, and people enjoy the good things of life without fear or favour. People should be able to move about freely without fear of any molestation.

However, the reverse is the case in Rivers State today due to the menace of cultism and youth violence. Life is no longer what it is used to be. The state has degenerated into a state of anomie which has been a prominent issue in recent times. There has been an increase in the occurrence of acts of violence and lawlessness, including things like terrorism, kidnapping and hostage-taking of prominent citizens and expatriate oil workers, as well as illegal oil bunkering, arms insurgency, cultism.

The issue of violence and killings did not start recently in the state. Records show that in 2015, a commission of enquiry was constituted by a former governor of the state, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi, to probe the political killings and destruction of property before and after the 2015 general elections. Then, 19 persons were killed monthly between November 15, 2014 and April 11, 2015. The panel, headed by ex-Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, Prof. Chidi Odinkalu, told journalists that the panel received 97 allegations of killings while 94 were verified to be true. The Community Development Committee chairman of Rumuolumeni community, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Mr Sunny Odum, said the best way to tackle the menace was for the state governor, Nyesom Wike, to be proactive in stemming the matter. Odum suggested that deployment of tactical security teams in the affected communities would check the attacks, maintaining that negotiating with the criminals was not the most effective approach.

In view of the foregoing, Rivers State of Nigeria has literally erupted with unrivalled cults' violence for some time now. Today, if it is not Aluu, it is Choba, Rumuosi, Rumuekini, Emuoha, Owhipa, Mile 1, Mile 3, Port Harcourt Town, and some communities in Ogoni land. Despite beefing up of security in these areas, the problems still loom. The study will critically investigate the institutional factors that breed lawlessness in the Niger Delta and more especially Rivers State and suggest better ways to respond to it.

In this study answers are provided to such problems as why do youth join cults group? Who are those who join? What are the socio-cultural attractions embedded in cultism? And why the government despite obvious negative consequences of cultism has not come up with an effective national policy for cultism in the state and on our campuses?

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, we shall attempt to explain the cultism phenomenon through the Anomie Theory and Differential Association Theory. The main thrust of the Anomie Theory is basically that people violate laws or norms because they lack opportunities to achieve legitimate goals through legitimate means. The great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim used the concept of Anomie or Normlessness to explain deviant, behaviour. Anomie is generally taken to mean that under certain social conditions such as during times of rapid change, traditional societal norms and rules lose their ability to regulate behaviour, thus resulting in the state of what has been called Normlessness. In such a state, said Durkheim, pressure towards deviant behaviour develops because aspirations no longer seem to match the possibilities of fulfilment. Legitimate desires that cannot be satisfied through conformity are said to force the individual into deviance. There is a breakdown of existing social rules, laws and values, and crime becomes the normal response to the existing social environment and condition. During the 1960s and 1970s, the US was reported to have experienced many social upheavals and rapid changes, urban riots, associations, campus disorders, the Vietnam War etc.

This period was said to have witnessed a large increase in crime and delinquency. The simultaneous occurrence of these events lent support to Durkheim's ideas about the association of anomie and deviant behaviour. The concept of Anomie and its relationship to deviant behaviour was refined and developed by another sociologist Robert Merton. Merton believed that the roots of deviant behaviour could be traced to the social structure itself, because there is an imperfect coordination of the goals and means of a given social structure. This leads to a strain toward anomie and subsequent deviant behaviour. Specifically, delinquent behaviour arises out of the attempt of a given person to adapt to stress. A stress brought about by a social structure that encourages the achievement of certain goals but does not make the means for achieving these available to everyone. Merton said that delinquency could be regarded as a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenue for realizing their aspirations. Merton went further to describe five types of individual adaptations under anomie situation viz, conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion.

The adaptive type most conducive to delinquent and criminal behaviour, he said, is innovation. Because of the strain of frustrated ambitions, an orientation toward chance and risk taking is encouraged and a tension toward innovative practices that depart from institutional norms and rules are created. In this instance, ambition promotes deviant behaviour. Judging from the anomie theory, some underlying reasons for youths joining secret cults are explained, considering the dissociation that accrue to goals set by the Nigerian society

for the youths and the dysfunctionality of the institutions and subsystems outlined for matching such goals. For example, the deplorable economic situation of the nation with its attendant multifarious hardship on families obviously exposes students to stress, difficulty and frustration in the bid to achieve their academic goals. However, the make-it-easy tradition and orientation pervading the society, to which the youth have been exposed leaves them only with the strong option of joining the cult groups as an alternative means of achieving their erstwhile difficult livelihood and academic goals.

Cultism and Youth Violence in Rivers State

Cultism and youth violence go hand in glove. Despite the campaigns against cultism, cult related killings and other crimes have continued on the rise in many Nigerian institutions. Rivers State has been ensnared in a mind-numbing cycle of violence orchestrated by vicious cult groups that operate without fear; neither do they worry about any dire consequences for their actions. Of recent, gang wars have ravaged many communities, including Ogoni, Andoni, Emohua, Abua-Odual, Rumuolumeni, Ikwerre and Eleme, where everyone appears to be on edge. Some of the groups that have continued to perpetrate a culture of violence and bloodshed, as well as terrorise the people of the state are Deywell, Deybam, Iceland, Greenland, Green Bishops [3]. (The Guardian, Sunday Magazine, 28 April, 2019).

Membership of the known secret cults on campus is no longer the exclusive preserve of students in higher institutions. For long, it has been entrenched in both primary and secondary schools. It has become pervasive and intractable. Security agents have established that at least 35 cult groups exist in institutions of higher learning across the country. Some of the identified ones are Pyrates, Black Axe, Buccaneers, Eiyé, Vikings, Black Berrets, Red Devils, KKK, Maifites and Black Heart. An educationist who does not want to be identified pointed out that the spate of cult activities is anathema to academic pursuits. With an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, the ivory tower can no longer live up to its name as the citadel of learning and knowledge (Leadership Newspaper, 8 Sept. 2011).

Their resort to decapitation of their victims, specifically severing their heads from their bodies, and ripping open their bowels offers a glimpse into the vile and barbaric modus operandi of these obnoxious groups. Since February this year, rival gangs in the Ogoni area of the state have been neck-deep in tit-for-tat violence over crime turfs. And by the last count, at least 50 persons have been killed in the now volatile Ogoni axis, while scores are hurt and thousands compelled to desert their communities (The Guardian, Sunday Magazine, 28 April 2019). Kidnapping is growing rapidly in Rivers State unabated. A passenger bus was hijacked by armed bandits on Tuesday, June 18, 2019 at the Ewkwu community axis of the East-West Road in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. The development was reportedly confirmed by the spokesman of the Rivers State Police Command, Nnamdi Omini, who, however, disclosed that efforts were underway to track down the kidnappers and rescue the victims. Omini reportedly noted that three passengers and the driver were kidnapped by the bandits and that the vehicle had been recovered by the police. Two police escorts were also killed along the Ahoada-Ndele-Rumuji-Emohua axis of the East-West Road. These two police officers were returning from an official trip from the neighbouring Bayelsa State when they were attacked by the gunmen.

The issue of cultism I must say has come to stay in Rivers State unless the mindset of the youths is changed or restructured. It is high time youths in this region are told the gospel truth that manna does not fall from heaven anymore. It is either they further their education and secure good jobs or learn handwork or trade. Cultism is not a means of livelihood. They should know it is only hard work that guarantee them good and secured future. Traditional rulers are not doing what they are supposed to be doing. They know these youths that are causing these problems in these communities, but they are not doing much to have them arrested and so are the security agents.

An Ogoni monarch, Gbenemene Bangha Kingdom, Suanu Baridam, observed that even though the governor is the chief security officer of the state, there is nothing he can do if traditional rulers and youths fail to offer their support, or assist in tackling insecurity. "No one will say that they don't know who is disturbing our communities. We know the people who are creating problems in our communities." A sociologist, George Boma said that the lack of job opportunities in the rural areas was contributory to the hopelessness that is prevalent in most communities. The quest for survival at all cost makes cultism alluring to these youths, who are least bothered about the consequences thereof, and this makes it alluring. "Life is tough in Ogoni, Kalabari, Ogba, Egbema, Ikwerre, Abua/Odual and in Ekpeye communities. There are no job opportunities and these youths need to survive. You have families that are fractured and there are no role models to warn these youths of the dangers of cultism. So, these boys grow up not feeling love and having seared conscience. We need to rebuild our communities," he said (The Guardian, Sunday Magazine, 28 April 2019).

Causes of Cultism and Youth Violence

The question is, what are the causes of these youths joining cult groups and violence? The answer is not far-fetched. Unemployment, lack of quality education, poverty and broken homes seem to be the major

causes to these societal issues. Poverty is another cause of youth restiveness. There is so much poverty, inequality, and social injustice in Nigeria. Due to poverty, many youths in urban centres in Nigeria have taken to hawking on the streets just to eke out a living. The sales they make per-day and the profit margin on their goods are so small that they can hardly live above the poverty line. Disillusioned, frustrated, and dejected, many of them seek an opportunity to express their anger against the State. The consequences of youth restiveness on our society are what we are witnessing today.

(i) The Collapse of the Family Institution

The Daily Times of Nigeria, of March 22, 1994 wrote in its Editorial, inter alia – the reign of secret cults and their mind – rendering activities are a manifestation of decay in modern day families. Due to the fervid race for material aggrandizement, parents have abandoned their traditional moral responsibilities. This has consequently brought about scant concern for proper upbringing of the child by their parents, who in share escapism transfer this burden to the child’s schoolteachers’.

(ii) Effects of Parents on Crime Rates and Violence

The absence of the father is the single most important cause of crime (Wright & Wright, 1992). In fact, boys who are fatherless from birth are three times as likely to go to jail as peers from intact families, while boys whose fathers do not leave until they are 10 to 14 years old are two times as likely to go to jail as their peers from intact families (Harper & McLanahan, 2004:369-397). According to Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, children without a father are more than twice as likely to be arrested for a juvenile crime and are three times more likely to go to jail by the time they reach age 30 than are children raised in intact families. Adolescents who had a positive relationship with their fathers are less likely to be arrested, belong to a gang, damage property, steal, or run away compared to their peers with less positive relationships with their fathers (Bronte-Tinkew & Moore, 2006). According to a 1990 report from the Department of Justice, more often than not, missing and “throwaway” children come from single-parent families, families with step parents, and cohabiting-adult families.

The early experience of intense maternal affection is the basis for the development of a conscience and moral compassion for others (Belsky, 1988). According to Chuck Smith, a Kansas State University child development expert, “as a child grows and matures, the mother—whether biological or a stepmother—plays an important role in her child’s development, character and attitudes (Smith, 2011). If a child’s emotional attachment to their mother is disrupted during the first few years, permanent harm can be done to the child’s capacity for emotional attachment to others.

Separation from the mother, especially between six months and three years of age, can lead to long-lasting negative effects on behaviour and emotional development. Severe maternal deprivation is a critical ingredient of juvenile delinquency. We also know that a weak marital attachment resulting in separation or divorce accompanies a continuing life of crime (Farrington, 1989).

(iii) Effects of Parental Breakup on Adolescent Violence

In 2008, there were over 8 million divorced adults in the United States. Breakup of a child’s parents’ marriage during the first five years of their life places a child at high risk of becoming a juvenile delinquent (Loeber, 1986). This breakup – through either divorce or separation – is most likely to occur three to four years after marriage. Therefore, a large proportion of very young children experience the emotional pain of the early and final stages of marital dissolution at a time when they are most vulnerable to disruptions in their emotional attachment to their parents [14]. (Farrington, 1989). This instability continues to impact adolescents as they mature. Teens in blended or divorced families tend to have more behavioural problems, like using tobacco, binge drinking, weapon carrying, physical fighting, or sexual activity (Rodgers & Rose, 2002).

Rates of conflict are much higher outside intact married families (Harlow, 1991). The rates of emotional and behavioural problems of children are more than double in stepfamilies (Zill & Schoenborn, 1990). Given their impact on children, the marriage arrangements of parents have significant effects on the incidence of teenage crime.

The Role of Sports in Addressing Youth Violence

Approximately 775,000 youth in America are involved in gangs. According to Kids Play USA Foundation, adolescents who don’t have adult supervision at least three days a week are twice as likely to hang out with gang members and three times as likely to be engaged in criminal behaviour (Moses, 2016).

There are two ways we can address youth violence and crimes: prevention and reducing recidivism, which is the tendency to relapse into criminal behaviour. By harnessing the power of sport and providing youth sport programs with strong mentors, the sport for development sector can strongly impact the lives of youth and environments in communities to help prevent youth violence and reduce recidivism (Moses, 2016).

There are many Sport-for-development programmes in the United States of America and these have the power to prevent youth from turning to delinquent activities, and there are many programmes which do this very well in communities around US. The STARS Programme in Fort Myers, US helped reduce the amount of juvenile arrests by nearly 1/3 since the programme started, according to the local police department (Moses, 2016). It will not be out place if these types of programmes are started in Rivers State to curb youth violence. The Sports Institute in Isakaba, Rivers State is now a shade of its former self. We need to re-start it and encourage more of such. These youth need to be engaged in meaning ventures.

Laureus published a report regarding the economic benefits of sport tackling youth crime. With three examples of programs in the UK (Kickz, The Boxing Academy, and 2nd Chance), the report showed that sport programs can reduce costs for society by “reducing costs to the criminal justice system... and improving the life chances of young people.” The report tracked youth in various stages of the criminal pathway. In one Kickz location in North London, youth crime dropped from more than 2,500 incidents to less than 900 incidents in the third year of programming; 20 per cent of this reduction is thanks to the Kickz program. This demonstrates that intentionally designed sport-for-development programs can be used to prevent crime and reduce recidivism.

Through these types of programmes, functional family therapy is used as a form of rehabilitation with the goals of “reducing criminal behaviours, decreasing individual and community risk factors, changing negative family relationships and enhancing protective factors to facilitate relapse prevention.”

Communities and local organizations that provide youth sport programmes can make an immeasurable difference in preventing and reducing youth violence by intentionally addressing this issue. Kids Play USA Foundation presented some benefits regarding youth sports:

There are plenty of programs and national initiatives that have proven to be successful in preventing youth from engaging in criminal behaviour. However, the U.S. lacks enough programs that reduce recidivism amongst youth. The sport for development sector needs to respond to this gap. Many studies have shown that juvenile crime rates are consistently reduced in neighbourhoods where sports-based youth development programs enrich the lives of at-risk youth. These programs often result in community cohesion, which promotes the acceptance of people from different backgrounds and encourages strong and positive relationships between these individuals.

Martial Arts Schools and Academies should be encouraged in the communities and primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. Martial Arts are character moulding sports. Why do you think that made the Asians wonderful in all the things they are into? This is what we call the “Management of Do”; The “Do” here is, Karate-Do, Taekwondo, Hapkido, Judo, etc. The “Do” means the proper way of doing things. Martial Arts should be inculcated into our schools’ curriculum. Martial Arts give these youth good character, Self-discipline, Self-confidence, Respect, Self-defence, Boldness, Self-control and Humility. Sports should run side-by-side with academic programmes in all our schools.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen that the development of cultism is because of the endemic corruption and impunity in the society as well as youth’s unemployment and frustration that goes with it. Cultism is not only predominant in Rivers State, but also in other states of the federation. As I have mentioned earlier, both the streets, communities and universities cult groups have the same modus operandi. The politicians used the cultists to fight election, they (cultists) had arms that were procured to fight election and after election, it was diverted into cultism and thuggery. He urged churches, mosques, and families to join in the effort to curb the menace.

Family has failed woefully in children upbringing in Nigeria especially in Rivers State. There is need to go back to the drawing board. There are too many broken homes in the state and that what is happening today is the aftermath of it. As a child’s emotional attachment to his parents ensures a well-adjusted adult, so parental rejection of the child has powerful opposite effects. Rejection by the family, which is the child’s first and fundamental “community,” sets the stage for another social tragedy. Bonding between children and parents is critical to helping protect against youth violence.

Political tension in Rivers State is not the only contributing factor exacerbating cult violence. Unemployment among our youths, poverty, peer group influence and frustration are some of the causes of cultism. Illicit drugs are one of the causes of cultism and youth violence. These drugs make these youths to forget their plight and start living in a fool’s paradise. “Secret cults have to do with men and women who have accepted defeat and are mentally lazy, people who cannot use legitimate means to earn legitimate results” said Peter Ogbor, a security officer in Edo State.

Despite the campaigns against cultism, cult related killings and other crimes have continued the rise in many communities in Rivers State. The activities of cultists in our communities here in Rivers State have assumed an unprecedented proportion that no articulated and lasting solutions seem to be in sight. Last week it was in Ozuoba/Ogbogolo area and it seems such is becoming very unbecoming. The question now, is, when is it going to end.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Shootings associated with warring cult groups seem to have come to stay in Rivers State. These groups have been linked with extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking, intimidation, protection rackets, armed robberies and political assassinations and all sorts. The East-West Road between the Ogbakiri and Elele is becoming a no-go area and many drivers and passengers have lost their lives and kidnapped on that road. Here let us see the solutions that can help us to check the activities of this cult groups and youth violence in the state and its environs.

i. The family as the main agent of socialisation has failed in the Rivers State. The collapse of the family institution is a contributing factor predisposing youth to join secret cults and engage in act of violence. Many children no longer have parents they can look up to for inspiration. Improper parenting and peer group influence are the major causes of the violence we are witnessing in Rivers State today. There is urgent need to restructure the family again because things have fallen apart.

ii. There is need to restructure our schools' curriculum. Peace education should be inculcated into our schools' curriculum both in the primary and secondary levels. Peace education should be the concern of all whether young or old. Equipped with peace education, individuals in the society will have respect for his/her neighbours and be able to query indecent mode of behaviour.

iii. Despite the various measures, it appears the proliferation of cult groups and their dastard acts continue unabated perhaps due to the lukewarm attitude of the government and the traditional rulers and parents. The Government should live up to her responsibilities by creating employment for our youths and make education compulsory and free for primary and secondary school. Scholarships and student bursary should be brought back.

iv. Technical and vocational education should be vigorously pursued. This will help in bringing down youth unemployment. Entrepreneurship education should be incorporated into our secondary and tertiary institutions. These youths should be given soft loans as a take-off capital to start small scale business that will sustain and keep them away from criminal activities and other vices. Government should force it into the Multinationals to allocate employment quota to their host communities and embark on youth empowerment and skill acquisition programmes.

v. There is need for government to encourage skill acquisition training and give out starter packs at the end of it all. These youths should be monitored after starter packs have be given to make sure they are doing what they supposed to be doing.

vi. Influence of Peer Group: At adolescent, there is a shift of emphasis on social relationship from the parents to the peer group. As adolescent breaks the total reliance and contact with his/her parents, he/she shifts same to the newly acquired group which in most cases is any group on campus he/she embraces or the neighbourhood. Parents must really watch out at this stage of their adolescent children.

vii. There is need for Rivers State government and Local Government Areas to provide sports facilities in all the communities so that these youths would occupy their minds with sports and probably gain employment through such. This is because, an idle mind is a devil's workshop as the saying goes. Rivers State should be among the best swimmers in the country but how many medals have she wonat the National Sports Festivals in swimming all these years. Sports instil positive attitudes and discipline in our youths and we are not encouraging them to take to sports.

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