

RELIGION AND CULTISM IN NIGERIA TERTIARY INSTITUTION

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and cultism makes for an interesting topic for analyses, especially in Nigerian Institutions of higher learning. In Nigeria, religion is given a pride of place. Many of the Nigerian citizens are members of one religious group or the other. There are three main religious groups in Nigeria. These are (1) Christianity (2) Islam and (3) African Traditional Religion (ATR). The first two (Christianity and Islam) can be referred to as world religions as they are practiced across the globe. Their origins are foreign to Nigeria. The third one, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is essentially indigenous to Nigeria.

Christianity came into Nigeria through the European Missionaries in the 19th century AD while Islam came into Nigeria through Moslem clerics from North Africa from the 13th to the 14th century AD. The spread of Christianity earlier concentrated within Southern Nigeria while the spread of Islam concentrated within Northern Nigeria. With time, both religions have spread across the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. The spread of Islam in Nigeria drew great impetus from the Islamic Jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio in 1804. Through this Jihad (Holy War) the Moslems overthrew the political leaders of the Hausa City States and created the emirate system. This enabled them to establish Islam as a State religion in the conquered territories of Northern Nigeria.

Estimates suggest 90 million Nigerians are Moslems. The estimated population of Christians in Nigeria is 87 million (Wikipedia 2023). This means that the population of the country is nearly distributed equally between Moslems and Christians.

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is indigenous to the Nigerian citizens. Each of the ethnic/cultural groups in Nigeria has its specific religion which had been there before Christianity and Islam. The indigenous peoples of Nigeria believe

ve in the existence of the Supreme God known by various names (Chukwu Okike by the Igbo people, Olodumare by the Yoruba, Soko by Nupe etc Oti; 2005). They also believe in the existence of deities. These deities have their functional areas through which they control the affairs of the people.

The Igbo people believe in the earth deity that controls the earth force. It controls the activities of the members as long as they live on the earth surface (O ti, 2005). The Yoruba people believe in the Ifa Oracle (among other deities). This deity is in charge of divination and controls various facets of the people's existence. It is the mouth piece of the Supreme God as well as the other deities. It gives direction to the actions of the worshippers.

Communities in the indigenous society also have their community specific deities controlling aspects of life. These deities are believed to have rules and regulations which control the affairs of the members and anybody who goes contrary to this faces severe consequences. In the above regard, acts which are inimical to equity, good conscience and social justice are punished by the deities. It is important to note that though Islam and Christianity are popularly accepted by the people of Nigeria, there are instances where the people consult the deities for specific purpose (though good Christians and Moslems are not expected to do so).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

What is Religion?

Religion can be defined as a social institution which guides peoples' beliefs and practices with respect to sacred and spiritual matters. The key issue in religion is the existence of spiritual forces which are believed to control the affairs of man. These forces are believed to reward or punish individuals based on their actions Mberu (2001) noted that religion serves at least four (4) basic functions, namely (a) overcoming the fear of pain or anxiety (b) giving meaning to life and the world (c) giving identity to the adherents (d) supporting social norms, values and maintaining social solidarity. Mberu (2001) further noted that religion i

s an instrument for social control . this function of social control is fundamental in every religion in general and the three religions in Nigeria in particular. Njoku (2009:115) defined religion as a belief system concerning one or more deities and incorporating rituals, ceremonies, ethical guidelines and life philosophies.

Adeoye and Aborisade (2013) identified five qualities that are peculiar to all religious beliefs, namely (i) faith (absolute trust with or without proof) (ii) Myth (stories or narratives that describe the crucial events in the religion) (iii) Deity (this refers to an entity that has divine features or quality) (iv) Rites (formal practices or customs associated with the religion) (v) Sacrifice (objects which are offered to the deity to ensure right relationships). Anyika (2003 in Adeoye and Aborisade 2013) defined religion as the outward form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of God or gods or a supreme being having power over their destiny. The central theme in every definition of religion is the existence of spiritual forces which suppliants owe absolute allegiance to.

What is Cultism?

The concept of cultism emerged in the vocabulary of Nigerian tertiary institutions in late 1950s and 60s. It refers to actions which associations of students engage in, which are clandestine in nature (sacred) and are associated with acts of violence, terror, intimidation and waste of lives and properties. They are involved in acts which are inimical to peaceful existence of society. Secret cults are groups or associations in tertiary institutions which are not recognized or registered by the governing authorities of the institutions.

According to Nwosu(2009:14) "Secret cults are exclusive clandestine groups which are believed to be diabolic and satanic in their operations. They are known to use charms and sometimes conduct their activities at burial grounds (and other hidden places) and even invoke the spirits of the dead"

The term cult is derived from a Latin word "Cultus" which means worship, reverence or religious devotion given to one (Okunamiri 2009: 45).

Secret cults are malevolent cult groups which cause all sorts of harm and trouble

e to non-members and even to "erring" members (Okunamiri 2009: 45). They are destructive and anti social groups and secret cultism has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian education system as scores of persons have been killed, maimed and valuable properties destroyed on campuses and all these negatively affect learning in Nigeria schools (Okunamiri, 2009:45).

In Nigeria generally, a cult is a group of people with special and exclusive rituals and considered by many as extreme and or dangerous (Mgbemena, 2009:58). Okunamiri (2009) and Mgbemena (2009) distinguished between benevolent cults and malevolent cults. The benevolent cults are those cult groups that are useful to themselves and to the society at large whereas the malevolent cults are those cults that form all kinds of trouble to the society and even to their own defaulting members. In articulating an overview of secret cult activities in Nigeria Mgbemena (2009:66) identified the following (i) disorderly conduct (ii) intimidation (iii) forcible rape (iv) Robbery (v) Molestation (vi) Murder (vii) Aggravated Assault (viii) Intentional stabbing and (ix) Disorderly life style.

Nnubia (2009:79) noted that cultism persists in our tertiary institutions of learning because of family influence, peer pressure, protection from academic failure, moral decadence, lack of self confidence, exaggerated expectations from the group, etc. In contributing their opinion to the meaning of secret cult, Onuoha and Ogba – Amaugo (2013) noted that cultism is a ritual practice by a group whose membership, admission policy, mode of operations are done in secret and kept secret with their activities having negative effects on both members non-members and the society at large.

In general, cultism in Nigeria in tertiary institutions refers to the activities of clandestine associations which are nefarious and injurious to the well being of the entire society.

Origin of Cultism in Nigeria

The history of cultism in Nigeria can be traced to the activities of seadogs and confraternity (Pyrates) which began in 1952 at the University College Ibadan

(University of Ibadan). It was founded by such notable Nigerian as Professor Wole Soyinka, Professor Olumiyinwa Awe, Tunji Tunji, etc (Unagha 2001). The association was free of violence and had the following objectives: (1) To challenge ethnocentrism (2) to promote the value of African culture on campuses and (3) create change within its primary environment.

Okunamiri (2009:46) Further identified the following objectives of the pirate confraternity as follows (i) to fight against colonial mentality (ii) to fight for humanization idea, establish discipline, orderliness and orientation to national objectives (3) to fight against corruption and tribalism.

After the pirates came the Buccaneers and the Vikings confraternity. These were splinter groups from the earlier groups. Members of the earlier group who were disciplined for one act or the other decided to form new groups. From the initial group, over 51 cult groups have emerged. (Mgbemena 2009:62-63). These cult groups go with such names as Aye (Eiye or national association of Air Lords). Black Axe confraternity; Black Baret; Green Baret; Red Baret; The Red Devils; The scorpion; the Black Cat, the Trojans Horse; the Daughters of Jezebel, Black Bra; White Bra, etc. (Onuoha & Ogburn – Amaugo). What started as healthy quest for social order degenerated into groups associated with heinous crimes and all sorts of clandestine inhuman and anti social activities.

Why Do Student Join Cults

There are various reasons why students in Nigerian tertiary institutes have continued to join secret cults. These reasons range from social, psychological to economic reasons. Some of them are:

- (1) Students join cults to catch up with the peers who are already involved in cultism. Peer pressure is a very strong influence on adolescents and youths who do things because their mates are doing them (Nwosu 2009). Students want to belong to the associations of their friends, roommates, class mates, course mates etc. Cults are f

fraternity-based groups and students join them to enjoy such fraternity (Nnachi & Ewenwa 2009).

- (2) Students may join cults to have emotional stability. Some of the young people who have inferiority complex join cults to boost their confidence and moral.
- (3) Some student may join cults for economic reasons where children of the wealthy among them contribute money or share resources which can go round for those who do not have. Cult members use intimidation to rob fellow students or dispossess them of their valuables. They will then live lives above their means through the stolen items.
- (4) Students can join cults with the promise or false hope that through their "hardness" and toughness they can force lecturers to pass them in examinations. Some of them can intimidate fellow students to assist them in examination hall out of fear. Several other reasons can lure students into the nefarious activities of campus cults like protection from rival cults, bullies and other uncomfortable situations on campus.

The Role of Religion in Curbing Campus Cults

The religious groups on Campus can be used as counter cultism groups in the following ways:

1. Campaigns can be mounted by the religious groups like campus fellowships by sharing scriptures which condemn the diabolical activities of the cults. The Bible says in the ten commandments "you shall not murder", "you shall not steal" (Exodus chapter 20 verses 13 and 15) and some other scriptures that condemn the activities of

f cultism.

2. The second campaign is through prayers. The students who have been lured into cultism may be afraid of one thing or the other. Unagha (2001), Nwizu & Akonye 2013 and others had observed that fear drive students into cultism. With prayers, they can be delivered from such fears. Prayers will also give them both assurance of safety and continued protection from attacks of both cult members and other dangers on campus. Prayers also create emotional stability which they seek for in the cult groups.
3. Religion can provide tracts and other pieces of literature which deal with issues of life and life after death through such literature, those who had joined earlier can be set free and those who are about to join will realize the dangers of cultism. Some of the literature can be written specifically on the dangers of cultism as well as the fate that waits for cultists in after life.
4. Social media can be used to mount campaigns against cultism. The religious bodies that campaign against cultism can use various social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, etc to reach the students. This is a viable instrument because most young people are exposed to the social media through their handsets and other gadgets. The campaigns can be mounted through stories and plots or music which expose the ugly consequences of cultism and how one can escape it.
5. Religious groups can organize open-air crusades on campus with themes that condemn the activities of cultism. Prominent preachers will be used as guest speakers together with well-known artists (music and drama) who will convey the message and those who are already into cultism may be rescued while others who intend to join will change their minds.
6. One-on-one evangelism is another important strategy which religio

us groups can use to curb cultism on campuses. In this strategy vibrant members of the campus religious groups can engage their classmates, course mates, room mates, etc on intensive one-on-one evangelism. Where this is backed-up by the power of prayers, it will lead to winning the souls of cult members into the religious group and for a noble course.

Alanamu, Olanrewaju & Muhammed (2004) were of the view that the menace of cultism in Nigerian schools can be drastically reduced or eliminated through the internalization and inculcation of the fear of God in the minds of students. Similarly, Ugwu & Chukwuma (2021) had earlier outlined strategies through which Christian campus fellowships can fight against cultism in Nigerian Universities as enumerated above.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, religion is a strong Social Institution and many of the citizens are adherents of one religious persuasion or the other. Considering that religion dictates to its followers basic values intended to guide people towards living an ideal life style, it can be used to counter the ugly trend of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions and even at other levels of education. It requires that religious bodies utilize and generate strategies through which this can be achieved.

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