

## **The Political and Economic Dimension of Cultism in Rivers State, Nigeria**

Gbenemene kpae (Ph.D)

*Centre for Conflict and Gender Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria*

**Abstract:** *Crime is one of the social problems that is common to every country, because as society advances so is the rate of crime. However, this social problem is usually addressed by the creation of employment for the young people or the incarceration of repeat offenders in the penitentiary as a way of riding the society of violent criminal offenders. While many of these methods have worked in more advanced societies, that of Nigeria seems to have defied any solution. The situation in Rivers State is particularly noteworthy because cultism and gang violence is on a steady increase daily. Cult groups have become emboldened and have acquired more sophisticated weapons to challenge security agencies, and all government efforts at curbing their activities by rehabilitation of cult members through its amnesty programmes have had no meaningful effect on the rate of crime in the state. The critical question is, why has both government and security agencies' effort to ride the State of cult violence not produce any meaning result? This is the reason why this study seeks to investigate the political and economic dimension of cultism in Rivers State, Nigeria.*

**Key words:** cultism, gang, violence, crime, Rivers State, Nigeria

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### **I. Introduction**

Cultism as a social menace in Nigeria particularly in Rivers State has been widely discussed in academic literature (Adigwu, 1999; Ogunade, 2002; Rotimi, 2005; Kpae, 2016). Since cult activities first started at the university of Ibadan campus in the early 1950s, nobody envisaged that its activities would have such a negative impact on the Nigerian society as we are currently experiencing. Its main goal at inception was to discourage students from imbibing the elitist foreign culture that was common among many students then, and not to unleash mayhem on its citizens as we are currently experiencing in Rivers State. Cult violence has taken a different dimension in terms of the nature and type of violence that is being committed on a daily basis in various parts of the state. No community is exempt from cult related violence and the method of killing is not only brutal but barbaric, with the body of cult victims usually dismembered. Apart from the disarticulation of the victims' body, sometimes the cultists burn their victims in order to prevent any recognition and trace by law enforcement agencies. Such brutal way of killing only takes us back to the pre-historic days when man was living in savagery.

Cult violence and killings seems to have been institutionalized in Rivers State, and most adolescents have embraced the sub-culture of violence, because their activities appear to have the tacit support and patronage of some individuals who are highly placed in the state, especially political elites. The cult groups in Rivers State, in their battle for turf, inflict serious harm on both themselves and also innocent members of the public. The prominent cult groups in Rivers such as Icelanders, Deebam and Deewell are notorious for using violent and criminal methods that include armed robbery, kidnapping, oil bunkering, and trade in illegal weapons, drug sale, and human trafficking to sustain their illegal activities. The critical question is, despite government's effort at rehabilitation of repentant cult members through its amnesty programme, and the security agencies approach to problem of cultism through the establishment of a special anti-cultism unit, why has cult related violence not declined but continued to be on the increase in Rivers State? This is the crux of this research to examine the political and economic dimension of cultism in Rivers State.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Review**

Two theories are used in this study to examine the relationship between politics and economy and the prevalence of cultism and cult related violence in Rivers State. The theories include the social structure theory and frustration aggression theory.

#### **Robert Merton Social structure Theory**

Robert Merton used the anomie theory to explain how the social structure of society can create criminality and violence. Merton's concept of anomie was actually derived from Emile Durkheim (2014) in his published work "The Division of Labour in Society," in which Durkheim indicated that anomie exist when the rules that govern how individuals' interact with one another in society were broken or disintegrated; as a result, people were unable to determine how to interact with one another. Durkheim also argued that anomie exist when there is a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards, or the lack of social ethics which produces moral regulation and absence of legitimate aspirations. Thus, for Durkheim, anomie is a state of normlessness, which is a state where the expectations of behavior are unclear, and the system has broken down. However, Merton believed that normlessness may arise when there is inconsistency between cultural goals and the means of achieving them. Merton argued that criminality was higher in America compared to other societies because of the emphasis on success goals more than the emphasis on approved means of achieving those goals. Therefore, anomie is a disjuncture between goals and means of society. Merton concluded that it is the combination of the cultural emphasis and the social structure which produces intense pressure for deviation.

#### **Frustration-Aggression Theory**

The Frustration-Aggression theory was propounded by John Dollard and later popularized by Ted Gurr (1975) in his famous study on the cause of political revolt titled, "Why Men Rebel". The theory argues that a continuing or unresolved motivational conflict is a source of frustration (Atkinson and Atkinson, 1975). Gurr also posits that when a person's progress toward a desired goal is blocked, delayed, or otherwise interfered with, the individual encounters frustration. Blocked goal seeking therefore produces confusion, bewilderment, and annoyance. According to Gur, frustration, whether due to obstacles, deficiencies, or conflict, have both immediate and remote consequences. When a person's goal seeking is blocked, the individual or youth might react immediately or develop attitudes toward uncertainty that might have devastating consequences. Youth violence and criminality are usually some of the reactions to frustration arising from blocked goals.

A combination of Robert Merton's social structure theory and Ted Gur's frustration-aggression theory helps us understand why cultism and youth violence tend to persist in Rivers State. Many young people lack opportunity to make a decent living through legitimate means due to the poor state of the Nigerian economy. While the Nigerian society encourages youths to become successful, while there are limited opportunities for them to become successful. This situation is further compounded by the high unemployment rate, inequality and poverty, which produces intense frustration in many young people. This feeling of frustration due to the poor state of the Nigerian economy is further compounded by the few political elites who have amassed a greater portion of the nation's wealth and living the masses in penury. Most of the political elites display their wealth through their driving of luxurious cars and living in expensive homes. As a consequence of this deprivation many youths take to criminality and cultism as means of survival and to rebel against society's cultural goals. In this state of frustration and feeling of hopelessness, the political elites then provide temporary relieve to those youths who are ready to take to violence, especially those leaders who already belong to gangs and cult groups financial resources to recruit other street gang members and loyalists for purpose of election rigging and intimidation of political opponents.

### **2.1 Conceptual Review**

The word "cultism" is derived from the Latin word "cultus", which means "to worship or give reference to a deity" (Saheed, and Uche, 2016). Also, Aguda and Ogunbameru (2007) in Saheed and

Uche(2016) defined cultism as a group of people that are engaged in activities that is shrouded in secrecy that may not be religious in nature.

### **Emergence of Cult Activities in Nigeria**

The concept of cultism as we now know today first started on a college or university campus before it spread to urban streets. The circumstances that led to its emergence were very ultraistic based on its founders, but its consequence on communities today is deadly and terrifying. The present-day cult groups or cultism first started at the University of Ibadan by a group of students in 1952. The group established the Pirates Confraternity with the aim of kicking against the imitation of English culture and the adoption of the English elitist style of living among some college students. Later on other sprinter groups sprang up in other universities and colleges across the country until cultism spread to the street. The Pirates Confraternity was later registered in 1980 under the new name of “National Association of Seadogs”, and the “Supreme Eiyé Confraternity” was also formed at the University of Ibadan.

By early 1990s other fraternities and cult groups began to spring up as a result of relationship tussle among members of the previous confraternity. For example, the Buccaneers was formed in 1972 by Dr, Bolaji Carew, a former member of the Pirates Confraternity following his disagreement with the group. The Buccaneers also registered their group as “National Association of Sealords”.

After the formation of the Buccaneers, the Neo-Black Movement of Africa, also known as the “Black Axe” was formed at the University of Benin, which marked the beginning of confraternity violence in Nigeria. As the activities of confraternities began to derail from its original intention of the first fraternity, Pirates Confraternity decided to pull out of the universities and shut down all its student’s campus branches.

Thus, cultism migrated from the universities to the communities. However, the activities of cult groups especially violent clashes between groups seem to have declined over the years on university campuses, but appear to be on the rise in most communities and urban neighborhoods in Rivers State where cultism has been institutionalized and continues to thrive due to the various criminal methods, they use to sustain their operations and tacit patronage by political leaders.

### **History of Cultism in the Niger Delta**

The history of cultism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria started with the formation of the Neo-Black Movement of Africa, also known as Black Axe by some group of University of Benin students in Edo State in 1984. During the same period, the Eternal Fraternal Order of the Legion Consortium also known as Klan Confraternity was formed at the University of Calabar. Subsequently, the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) was formed in the University of Port Harcourt by former members of Buccaneer. The formation of Black axe entrenched violence among cult groups in Nigerian universities. More significantly, the formation of these cult groups on universities campuses across the Niger Delta region engrained rivalry and contest for territorial control among them especially between Black Axe, Supreme Vikings (SVC) and Klansmen Confraternity (KKK).

### **The Spread of Cultism to Communities and Street Corners in Rivers State**

The spread of cultism to communities and urban neighborhoods in the Niger Delta particularly in Rivers State is due to the establishment of affiliate street cults in communities by mainstream stream university cult groups such as the Vikings and Klansmen Confraternity (KKK). In addition, due to the vehement opposition of cult activities by university authorities, it made many of them to shift their operations to the streets and local communities where they recruited teenagers and young adolescents into their gang to carry out activities at the neighborhood level. For instance, the KKK established affiliate street cult called “Deebam, while the SVC established “Deewell”. Owonikoko and Ifukor (2016) believe that the spread of cultism to communities and urban neighborhoods by mainstream university confraternities was to ensure safety in the communities and to extend their influence from the universities to the local communities. The Icelander (also known as (Germans) was formed by the Vikings following the inability of Deewell members to obtain street credibility and to carry

out organized violence and criminality in communities and urban neighborhoods. Since the establishment of these cult groups, there have been violent clashes leading to several deaths between these two groups.

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

Several reasons have been advanced as to the causes of cultism in Nigeria particularly in Rivers State. These factors include frustration due to harsh economic climate, political sponsorship, unemployment, inequality and genetic predisposition to commit crime. Udoh and Ikezu (2015) identified economic hardship and impunity as some of the causes of youth cultism in Nigeria, because most of those arrested are hardly prosecuted to serve as deterrence to other would be offenders. Furthermore, Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi (2010) noted that several factors are responsible for cultism in Nigeria including militarization of the Nigerian polity, decay in social life, economic hardship and increasing desire for materialism.

### **The Nexus Between Politics and Cultism**

Our understanding of the relationship between politics and cultism would be incomplete without first defining the concept of 'politics' and 'cultism'. According to the advanced learners Dictionary, politics is the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. On the other hand, cultism is any activity engaged in by a group of people in which their method of operation is done in secrecy and also involves some rituals.

The nature of politics in Nigeria is winner takes all, as a consequence, the opposition is always desperate to come back to power. Apart from the winner takes all nature of the Nigerian political system, politics has also become an attractive money-making venture, in which an individual who is appointed or elected into a political position can become very rich overnight. Due to this attraction, many people are eager to join the polity. Additionally, with high level of unemployment in Nigeria especially in the Niger Delta region, politics or political affiliation has become the past-time for many people. Since the game of politics has become a channel for making sudden wealth for many politicians, cult groups and gang members have become the instruments through which this can be achieved. Cult leaders act as anchor heads for recruiting cult members to perpetrate election violence. These cult groups are heavily funded to achieve this purpose. For example, John (2017) described the connection between politics and cultism in Rivers State as thus, "Political positions either through election or appointments, all of a sudden turns the person rich overnight. As a result, both those in powers and the opposition use every means at their disposal to either retain power or to try and get back to power. Sometimes, the means used could involve the use of criminal gangs and cult groups to threaten opposition and snatching of ballot boxes, which might explain why the activities of cult groups cannot be stopped or eliminated in the state".

Cult groups are provided with sufficient fund by political elites to acquire firearms for election rigging and threatening of political opponents. This may explain why cult activities are not on the decline in the Rivers State, because their operations receive tacit support from political elites in the state (Ifidon and Ihiazu, 2015). This situation was also corroborated by THE FUND FOR PEACE (2015) who noted that cult violence tends to be higher during elections because many cult groups depend on patronage of politicians, who either employ them as informal security or use them to intimidate, attack or kill their opponents. As a result of political sponsorship, some cult members have become lords with several boys working under them. The FUND FOR PEACE also captured this situation clearly in their press briefing that, "Due to the political underpinning of cult violence, many cult groups are either community-based or built on certain charismatic individuals who serve as rallying points for membership".

### **The Relationship between Economy and Cultism**

The economy of a country has a significant role to play in the living standard of its citizens. When there is economic growth, the living condition of the people would improve, and there will be low level of unemployment and youth unemployment. When the economy is in a very bad shape, as we are currently experiencing in Nigeria today, unemployment would be very high. The Nigerian economy has been experiencing a steady decline since the fall in oil price in 2016. The private sector and other small business

outlets that would have created employment are already quizzed of cash due to the single treasure account introduced by the federal government. According to a report from the National Bureau of Statistics (2010), it shows that the unemployment rate in Nigeria between 2000 and 2016 has been fluctuating. In 2000, for instance, the numbers of unemployed persons were 13%. In 2001 this figure rose slightly to 13.6% but declined to 12.6% in 2002, and rose again to almost 15% in 2003 and 2008 respectively. In 2009 the figure jumped to 19.4%, and rose to 25.2% in the last quarter of 2016. This shows that unemployment rate in Nigeria has always been in double digits compared to more advanced societies such as American that is less than 4% in the first quarter 2019.

The present economic recession in Nigeria is causing many people to experience economic hardship, thereby causing frustration in many individuals particularly the youths who are affected by the high unemployment rate in the country. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, out of 80 million youths in Nigeria, 64 million are unemployed while 1.6 million are under-employed. Among the youths that are unemployed, secondary school graduates are the most affected. The unemployment rate is also highest among youths that reside in the urban areas that fall within the age range of 20-24 years (31%)(Rotimi, 2012).

This unemployment situation is worst in the Niger Delta area especially in Rivers State where many companies have closed shop due to the high rate of insecurity in the state. The high unemployment rate in Rivers State has created a breeding ground for cultism and other criminal gangs to thrive. Gbosi (2015) noted that the effect of unemployment on the Nigerian economy is both macro and micro, but the micro effect seems to have the most devastating effect on the people, because many families particularly young ones who do not have a source of livelihood, are compelled to engage in anti-social behavior such as prostitution, drug abuse, kidnapping, gambling, oil bunkering, terrorism and armed robbery as a way of survival. Similarly, Adejunola and Tayo-Olajubutu (2009) believe that unemployment is a major cause of social vices such as armed robbery, destitution, prostitution, political violence, and kidnapping in Nigeria.

### **III. Methodology**

The nature of this research is qualitative; hence the sources of data came from review of previous literatures on the political and economic dimension to the problem of cultism in Rivers State. This enables the researcher to derive first-hand information on the subject matter. Relevant sources of data include information obtained from academic journals, text books, articles, magazines and internet sources.

The scope of this research was Rivers State, and it was chosen for analysis based on the prevalence of cult activities especially cult killings and victimization. One limitation to the present research was gathering enough literature on the topic. Very few scholars have researched in to this area thereby providing very limited empirical evidence to support the topic.

### **IV. Result and Discussion**

The result from our analysis of secondary data shows that cultism, gangsterism and other criminal violence, such as armed robbery and kidnapping are caused by economic hardship that are being experienced by most Nigerians. Our analysis also shows that political patronage is another factor that causes cultism and gang members in most part of Nigeria especially in Rivers State (Ajufo, 2013). This may explain why all government efforts at rehabilitation of ex-cultists and security agents' efforts to rid the state of cult activities have not yielded any meaningful result. Although, while the current poor state of the Nigerian economy and high unemployment rate might instigate and trigger some adolescent to go into criminality, but political sponsorship seems to be the likely explanation as why there is high prevalence of cult related violence in Rivers State. This political patronage has created some few charismatic leaders who have young boys working under them, and are already to become instruments to perpetrate election violence (THE FUND FOR PEACE, 2015). For instance, under the administration of Peter Odili, as Executive Governor of Rivers State, ex-militants and ex-cultists were asked to surrender their arms and ammunition, and the state assembly promulgated the Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) Law, No. 6, 2004, which proscribes stiff penalty for both individuals who engage in cult

activities and those that sponsor them. The present Governor, Nyesom Wike, has also introduced amnesty for ex-cultists. However, despite the tough penalty for those who engage in cultism and their sponsors and rehabilitation of cult members, cult activities in the state is still on the rise.

## V. Conclusion

Cultism and other cult related activities had existed in Nigeria prior to the advent of colonial rule where most people particularly in the western part of Nigeria formed themselves into groups to make supplications to their ancestors. During this period, criminality and criminal violence was not part of their ethos, even up till 1952 when the Pirate Confraternity (SEADOGS) was established violence was unknown to confraternities. However, violence became prominent among university confraternities when the Neo-Black Movement of Africa, a.k.a. Black Axe was founded at the University of Benin. In the 1990s, activities of confraternities expanded to the streets and creeks of the Niger Delta. The affiliation between confraternities and politics started during the military era 1980s-1990s, where confraternities were used by military leaders to check university staffs and unions who were opposed to military administration. However, this symbiotic relationship appears to have been solidified under the civilian administration where street cult groups such as Deewell and Deebam are heavily sponsored for election rigging and intimidation of political opponents.

It is noteworthy that cultism and gang violence is not unique to Nigeria alone. It exists in every society both developed and developing, Asia, Europe, America, and Africa, but cult groups or gangs do not get the kind of support and recognition as they receive in the Niger Delta of Nigeria especially in Rivers State. Apart from the fact that cultism and gang activities usually provide those from deprived neighborhood a sense of family and belonging (Kelly, 2004), the militarization of the Nigerian polity and the use of cult groups to achieve this purpose has not only entrenched cult rivalry and violence in Rivers State, but has made some cult leaders to become charismatic since they are capable of mobilizing cult members under them to carry out political thuggery and election rigging.

## Recommendations

We recommend a strong enforcement of the Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) Law, No. 6, 2004, as a way of deterring others who want to join and sponsor cult activities in the state. We also recommend the creation of employment for young people as a way of keeping them off the streets, where they become susceptible to recruitment into criminal gangs. This is because a prolong period of unemployment especially among young people creates a feeling of anger and frustration against society, and drives the individual into social vices. Finally, the security agents should be proactive in their fight against cultism and cult related violent crimes rather than reacting only after an incident such as murder or rape has occurred. The security agents should improve on their intelligent gathering method and use of community policing as a way of apprehending those involved in cultism and criminal behaviour in Rivers State.

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