

HISTORY, SOCIETY AND THE PHENOMENON OF CULTISM IN OUR INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING: IMPLICATION FOR COUNSELING

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ABSTRACT

Considering the preponderance of turbulence owing to cultism in our educational institutions in recent years, it is significant that the root causes of such destabilizing factor is thoroughly investigated and informed to educational administrators and other policy-makers to utilize by precluding or at least limiting further its occurrence. Hence, the main thrust of the paper therefore, is to examine historically the causes and effects of cultism in Nigerian Institutions of learning with a view to showing its implications for counselling in our society, which is today ridden with a lot of socio-political and economic problems.

Introduction: A Definitional Framework

What is cultism and what is a cult seems to be the enigmatic question which needs some answers for clarification. Whereas "cultism" denotes "a process", the term "cult" on the other hand, represents a collective noun based on activities of the grouping depending in time and space. The *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* defined cult as a term. "...most generally used in scholarly literature to designate a more loosely organized and more individualistic group. Based on individual concerns and experiences the cult is often transient, its membership often highly fluctuating. Belonging to the cult often does not involve an acceptance of common discipline (emphasis mine) and need not necessarily preclude membership in other kinds of religious groups. ..." As for the *Dictionary of Sociology* the term cult denotes the existence of "a body of religious rites and practices associated with the worship or propitiation of a particular divinity or group of supernatural beings". In the case of cult ancestor it is defined as "elaboration or extension of the ghost-cult consisting of practices and ritual observances associated with the worship or propitiation of the spirits of departed ancestors". The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* on the other hand, defines cult as "a system of religious worship, especially one that is expressed in rituals..." Finally, Hanks ed. (1979), *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* defined cult as "a specific system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and deity. ...a sect devoted to the beliefs of a religious or other cult". It goes on

further to give it a sociological definition "as a group having an exclusive ideology and ritual practices centred on sacred symbols, especially one characterized by lack of organizational structure" (Hanks ed. 1979:363). Thus, one interesting thing common to all the above definition is the employment of a general "idea of secrecy" applicable to cults irrespective of organizational forms, size or contents in space and time. According to Hanks ed. (1979), what is secret therefore, connotes to what is "kept hidden or separate from the knowledge of others". In other words, it is something like a secret password known only to accepted or sworn initiatives. Far from cultist appeals and adherence to the rules of secrecy, phrases such as "non-acceptance of common discipline", "rites and practices", "worship of a deity or supernatural beings", possession of an "exclusive ideology" - all runs through the definitions of cultism to give it a meaning of diabolical act, abnormality, shrouded mystery and even to some extent sorcery/witchcraft of serious magnitude. By implication therefore, the perception of cultism and its subscribers is to engender an aberrational behaviour which has always been abnormal but indiscipline in all ramifications. Since the behaviour displayed is devoid of any modicum of respect within the acceptable institutional confines, then the acts refers to what most practitioners of education and normal civil society will identify as "acts of indiscipline" or simply indiscipline.

At this juncture, it must however be realized that the perpetrators of these acts of indiscipline namely: the secret societies/cults in the context of Nigerian society "are not a system of religious worship, neither are they sects of any Religion" but an organization of members who convened secret meetings and execute clandestine activities for their common goals which are detrimental to healthy existence of their fellow brethren and sisters, as well as the general administration in the University campuses. Whether these fiendish cults have legal jurisdiction from the Supreme Nigerian Constitution or the Edict establishing the Universities to operate is not clear, but somehow "are allowed to exist in the larger Nigerian society" (Salami, 1999: 153). It is within this framework of thinking that we now proceed to ask what are the causes of cultism on student's learning in our society?

History, Society, Causes and Effects of Cultism on Student's Learning

Causes of Cultism in our Society

Before analyzing the causes of cultism, it is instructive that the names of these clandestine groups operative in the campus or other institutional settings be mentioned. Like the dreaded Mafioso wielding its nefarious activities these cults are known as the Pirates, the Buccaneers, the Ayes, the Black Axe, the Black Cats, the Maphites, the National Association of Sea Dogs and the Vikings all represented by different shade of colours, unintelligible ritual chantings, breach of law and order

and wholly ideological operations that are inimical to students and society at large all resulting from wanton and vindictive rivalries. According to Salami (1990) the history of the formation of these secret cults was traceable to Wole Soyinka in the early 1950s who in his student days at Ibadan first organized the Pirates or Sea Dogs Confraternity as a kind of student pressure group who vehemently opposed the indulgencies meted on the student body by the University authorities (Salami, 1999: 155). It is alleged that one of the main requirement for acceptance then into the association was academic excellence by an intending member, and that murder, arson or any other wanton destruction was not in their constitution. Today however, the reverse is the case. What then has been responsible for this breakdown of discipline leading to phenomenal occurrence of cultism among our youths in Institutions of learning? Empirical observation and available literature generally attributed the main causes of cultism to be identified with those factors of personality, home, school and the larger society.

Considering personality Hanks ed. (1979) gave its psychological definition as "the sum total of all the behavioural and mental characteristics by means of which an individual is recognized as being unique". The definition goes on as being "the distinctive character of a person that makes him socially attractive" (Hanks ed., 1979: 1094). Comprehending what the definitions entail makes one to realize the exhibition of personality traits indicating inferiority complex among student who are so desirous of recognition, and whose only solution to it remains that of joining gangs and cults. And where a student becomes involved he or she as alleged derives some psychological satisfaction of sense of belonging without his or her realizing of the impending perils ahead. What matters so far is the recognition among peer groups and the like and that has been achieved. As for information it is but the fear of insecurity which forces some students to join confraternities or cults. The issue of security therefore, revolves on desire for physical protection against aggression by other gang members on the one hand, and that of running into financial difficulties on the other. In this financial predicament it is an obligation on the cult to assist its members. It is interesting to however, note that unlike these cults, social clubs such as the Rotaract, Jaycees and others also dispense such token of financial assistance not only to its members but even to non-members. Another personality trait has to do with the intellectual ability of students especially where it shows a downward trend to academic incompetence. Hence, obsession with the fear of continuous repeat or withdrawal from a Course and with influence from erring cult members often forces students to seek solace by joining cults with the hope that they will get leakage of question papers or Lecturers would be intimidated to passing them. Further, in a situation where due to multitude of reasons a number of students happened to be schizophrenic (i.e. split of personality) and this has not been duly checked by authorities of the Institution, the likelihood is for those students to either drag themselves or be dragged into cults or confraternities. And owing to their condition of

diminishing responsibilities they will continue to perpetrate cultic acts, which are detrimental to harmonious atmosphere in the Institution's environment. Finally, the personality of a student whom as a child was subjected to abuse is likely to create a kind of psychological derangement or an aberrant attitude that will make him to develop hatred to constituted authority or repulsive to positive constructs in the immediate community. At times it is possible for such student to experience hallucination resulting in weird feelings that all those around bate him and this will force him to resort to violence under the guise of self- protection. This fact of child abuse has been demonstrated in the case of recent Santee, San Diego school shooting in America by Andy Williams (McCarthy, 19/3/2001: 28 - 32). Therefore, where, a student is faced with such personality conflict and on another side cults exist, thus it becomes easy to drift into these clandestine movements.

Where however, affluent home of the higher echelons of the society are concerned, the story is no less different from those of broken and poverty-stricken homes especially when one considers the assuming complexities of the society today. Here too, ostentatious living and conspicuous consumption in the midst of abject poverty and squalor as opposed to thriftiness and moderation often breeds envy, rivalry, hatred and kleptomaniasm among children of such homes. Having been used to conditions of high living and over pampering of children without showing them how to appreciate the dignity of menial labour even for some instances - such~ children when the affluence ceases they turn to vandalism and initiate as members of secret cults. The cults in this case are joined with the hope of getting another eldorado to maintain the status quo previously provided by the parents. This thinking relates especially to the fact that most of these cults and confraternities are heavily financed by their ex-members who have become public influentials and materially rich, but still are members of higher sinister organizations. Therefore, money to the cults in the Institutions to enjoy, purchase arms and create havoc is not a problem. Hence, membership is an assured ticket to that lost glory (Sokoto, 20/01/2000).

Still on the home front other factors include the "*laissex-faire* attitude" towards children by some homes, lack of moral upbringing, poor role models, inadequate attention by parents and interference of influential parents with school administration -L all used to create a multiplier effect on the negative behaviour display of students to drive them to embrace cultism and members of the cult as role models, which of course, is dysfunctional to the society. A cursory example in parental interference with the school administration was the recent jail incidence meted to a secondary school teacher in Sokoto by an influential father whose child was caned after breaking the school rules. According to myopic thinking of the father, he would rather be informed of the child's misdoing to be punished by him, than the school authority to do it. Grossly annoyed with this undue interference and jailing of the teacher, the school authority and the State Ministry of Education dismissed with

immediate effect not only the affected child, but also the whole of his children in the State Schools (Sokoto, 15/02/2001). This was meant to serve as punishment and deterrence to interfering parents in future who myopically think they are very important. The implication of this incidence on the part of the child if left unchecked is to convince him that his father is greater than the school authority let alone a single teacher, and therefore, he could continue committing all acts of indiscipline to the extent of organizing a gang or joining a cult if any of such association exists in or out of the school.

On further investigation, substantial information so far derived reveals that the Institutions themselves have been a major cause in the rise of cultism. The argument is that unfavourable school environment resulting from dearth of basic amenities promotes or breeds cult activities. A situation where the sufferings are unquantifiable for instance, ranging from poor library services, laboratories, workshops, hostels, text books, gymnasiums, dining halls and a host of others leads to high demand owing to population pressure (Katsina, 21/02/2001). The net result of this struggle is to invigorate a kind of Social Darwinism thereby proving "survival of the fittest thesis" within an educational setting. Conditions of this nature become more glaring and convincing in our Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and above all the Universities whose accommodative capacities have since been far out-stretched. In Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto it is not for any surprise for one to see students crowded or packed like sardines to a population of twelve souls and above in small rooms that physically could cater for a maximum of four bed space only. In Bayero University, Kano, Ahrnadu Bello University, Zaria and several others the story is no less different (Field Observation, Sokoto, 17/11/2000). In a situation where both accommodation and recreation facilities and sanitary conditions are so acute and poor to the extent of becoming health risk on the pressurized student population, then it is not unlikely that students would take recourse to activities of secret organizations to idle away their leisure time thereby scuttling the sorrows and pressure of their environments.

Beside the infrastructural decisions in the institutions, another cause to cultism also is the prevalence of extreme poor welfare conditions to teaching staff, which generally precludes them to always put in their best. By motivating the teachers materially and otherwise they in turn will activate the students so as to prevent them from committing some clandestine destabilizing acts associated with cultism. Much as this preventive thinking prevails there are still some exceptions to the opposite, which leads; to castigation of teaching staff as well in being strong levers to operation of cultism. On this the Institutions' authorities have to be blamed for knowing but still sanctioning the roles of some staff to even become patrons of cults or fraternities. This situation breeds an ugly invitation to the growth of cultism in schools whereby

school authorities often are held responsible for all the consequences (Oral Information, Katsina, 07/03/2001).

As for the larger society its role in cultism relates to the growth of excessive materialism, inordinate political ambition and undue social influence to mention but a few of the causes responsible. It is a no hidden fact that of recent the Nigerian society has been plagued with insecurity at all levels whose remedy according to some misconstrued minds is to amass material wealth in disregard to all forms of ethics. And to such crooked mind the acquired wealth transforms them into a kind of demi-gods who wield considerable power and influence in the immediate and larger community without the same communities gathering enough courage to question the source of the wealth. Owing to abject poverty of the general masses once the needs of few is satisfied, let the rest find their own ways of survival. With this graphic picture thus, individuals often are driven to search for this elixir of life through influence and join cults or secret societies such as Ogboni Fraternity, Cult of the Vulture, Association of Odd Fellow, 'Yan Shofimureda mureda, 'Yan fankan Kanu, "Yan Damfara, "Yan Daba Witchcraft Associations, Wizard Associations, Rosicrucians, Freeman Society and the Amorc Order. The interesting thing is that membership of these secret associations has cut across all segments of the society.

By implication however, it is such member who extend their diabolic misdeeds to young minds in institutions of learning through influence of money power and legal protection in case of any criminal act. In other perspective information had it that sons of the so-called moneybags, power-brokers and other influentials - Iso used to imbibe the ways of their parents right from home by delving in blood money, animal and human sacrifices. This is buttressed by the fact that sometimes initiated parents are demanded by the secret associations to involve their first male children as a form of security. And once responded to the demand, it means the individual's unflinching commitment is assured and the possibility of divulging any secret detrimental to the association is zero (Oral Information, Sokoto, 13/04/2001). By and large it is these kinds of influences that usually engender the growth of cultism in our institutions that in essence are not detachable from the larger society. Therefore, the cults and fraternities in the institutions are mere replica of the of the larger society outside.

Effects of Cultism on Students:

It needs no gainsaying to admit that cultism has for long been affecting the very existence of student's life from within and without. The effect came to be so because of its tight hold or strangulation of the student's jugular vein through inhibition of the mental faculty to distinguish what is ethically good or wrong for micro/macro developmental purposes of the nation. This perception revolves on the premise that in a country like Nigeria where the *raison d'etre* is materialism -a destabilizing factor

which is entrenched generally by a *laissez faire* attitude that also precludes questioning the origin or source of individuals acquired wealth leaves much to be desired in young minds whose imitative tendencies are true graphic representations of the larger society. In this respect the effect on student is to make them recipient of this transient but stormy culture of cultism and other secret societies that is associated with arson, rape, theft, blackmail, murder and human sacrifices all in the name of get-rich-quick. With this wanton vulgar material acquisition the students thinks that they have made a great leap forward when actually it is a great leap backward in their lives. This is because the cankerworm that is "love for money" as the only true meaning of life has become internalized in their minds and it is most difficult to get it removed for the better.

Another effect of cultism dwells on the capacity with which it usually turn students into psychopathic beings following rhythmic subjection or conditioning to rigorous dare-devil task of drinking concoctions, smoking hard substance, reciting horrifying incantations of witchcraft or sorcery as a form of demonic invocation -has to a great extent been a source of paralysis on the larger society .It has come to be so because it is a situation where cultism has impish influence on the most virile human assets (i.e. the young students) to Nigeria by turning them to madness. Just as the youth are normally initiated under the evil influence of the dark night - so also is their heart and brains made dark against the environment in which they live.

Further effects of cultism on students also prevail on the very learning process disseminated in the institutions. In their particular environments the culture of turbulence symbolizing cultist operation has continued to hamper on the peaceful atmosphere of learning for development. The students no longer feel safe to concentrate on studies due to possible or sudden outbreak of violence by rival gang clashes. The recent incidence at University of Ilorin where clashes between rival cults left many dead and wounded and also held the campus administration to ransom is a strong case in point. In these circumstances the University had to be-closed temporarily to allow sanity to prevail, and this undoubtedly had affected the student's learning process. Also looking at the effect of the turbulence from another angle it is indicative that an utter disregard and indiscipline was shown to the administration to the extent of being Wlable to nip the violence in the bud. With such incapacitation there is the tendency by some parents to be convinced in not sending their wards to institutions of higher learning for fear of being maimed or killed innocently. And if by any misconstrued thinking the fear begins to boggle the public minds, then it is most unfortunate because it has come to affect educational pursuit at a time when it is most cherished or sought after for development of our youths in Nigeria.

Implication for Counseling on Nigeria

With the above clarion call for a holistic involvement by society to problems of indiscipline, the issue, which arises now, reflects on the counseling approach as the solution. What is this counseling then and what implications does it have in relation to cultism in our institutions of learning? Whenever the word counseling is mentioned technically it is preceded by "guidance" which is a more general term that subsumes the former. Ideally and or methodologically there is no way in, which "guidance" will stand without "counseling" or vice-versa. This belief derives from the fact that only what is "guided", "unguided" or "misguided" is counseled. Therefore, guidance and counseling are two words of the same feather often used synonymously to describe prescriptive behavioural situations in both limited and wider educational and societal settings irrespective of local, regional or global dimensions in time and space. Though subject to many definitions, the term guidance generally refers to "the process of helping individuals to understand themselves and their world" (Shertzer and Stone, 1976). In relation to guidance, counseling on the other hand, refers to "a learning process in which individuals learn about themselves to advance their personal development (Shertzer and Stone, 1976). Whereas, precise and inclusive definitions of guidance and counseling are extremely elusive, the emphasis by both to phrases "helping" and "learning" processes indicates the implication of those processes with regard to the phenomenon of cultism in our; educational sanctuaries. While it is generally accepted in Nigeria that cultism and all its attendant evils has been impeding youth education -it is also not out of context to address it as a "factor of misguidance" whose implication for counseling requires a serious re-examination of the larger environment. Hence, under the "factor of misguidance" it behoves that all those "unguided", "misguided" (i.e. the victims) and those likely to be entrapped need the counseling intervention for both curative and preventive measures. The implication for counseling for instance, with regard to cultism in Nigeria's institution of learning is that the counselor has to be wary or take into consideration the complex of youthful stage which surrounds the life of students in both school and larger societal settings. Firstly, the onset of puberty for example, brings a host of physiological changes, which not only present adjustment problems in themselves but also challenge the student's individual's basic sense of self. In this situation the adolescent is often bombarded with a set of social demands and roles such as preparing for a job, marriage, active citizenship and leadership, setting up an independent household and a host of others. To cope with these physiological and emotional changes experienced by youths today becomes even more difficult because of rapid social changes owing to moral dilemmas and uncertainties that are pervasive in our contemporary Nigerian society. In Nigeria, this period of moral dilemma and uncertainties which in some perspective could be termed as "the middle passage" normally starts from secondary school extending to university graduation years and even beyond among some youths in extreme cases. Puberty, adolescence and

transition to adulthood reigns in this period. Information has it that it is those unable to cross these hurdles who mostly fall as casualties to the influence of cults and other secret association (Oral Information, Sokoto, 27/05/2001). Therefore, the counseling endeavour has to realize its moral responsibility in emancipating the youth from drifting to abyss through convincing argument that the change experienced as threat is however, "a fundamental characteristic of life at every age and state- (and) Effective response to its demands constitutes successful living" (Shertzer and Stone, 1976). At this juncture of the counseling process the counselors would thus conclude with a graphic picture to counselees, that cultism is a defeatist resolves which students escape to so as to find solace from challenges of life-beginnings while infact, the solace is not there. The best way to success therefore, is to respond to challenges positively by coming face-to-face with realities of the time.

Secondly, and in a much wider societal context is the "identity factor" which has serious implication for counseling in its effort to curb the phenomenal growth of cultism among students especially in Nigeria of the 1970s and after. Critics are likely to question why mention Nigeria of the 1970s and after -but to use it is very necessary because it is evident that the rolling years have witnessed traumatic changes whose roots lay in the civilian war, oil boom, environmental degradation, pestilence, famines, disease and the coercive process of emergent urbanization. The interaction of these harsh experiences have combined to break the simple family social set-up and the basic house-hold economy only to result in giving a different meaning to "sense of identity" of the self. The search for a sense of identity therefore, manifests a period of critical experience during which the Nigerian youth seeks to establish adequate peer relationship. During the search, which normally is a life-long process, it is not impossible for students to find economic, family and the regimented school structures as factors inhibitive towards their realization of a sense of identity. Where however, resentment exists for this perceived inhibition, the individuals is left with no option but to get embroiled in cultist movements with the aim of relating with the peer so as to establish and maintain an identity of the self. Who are you and what have you, often are menacing and irritable questions that drive people especially those with identity crisis to madness and this has a very serious implication for counseling in that the individual should be convinced of the vulnerability of the stage he/she is in and, which for positive realization of the self-goals-the stage has to be traced with caution. With such counseling therapy the youth will thus accept the situation as *fait accompli* and forge ahead to avoid nerve-cracking and inordinate ambitions within the ambit of "search for a sense of identity" which so often than not has landed many in trouble with the self, the system and the environment.

Thirdly, the onslaught of imperialist and capitalist economic activities and their agent's deep involvement in the wake of decolonization has led to excessive

materialism which broke the basis social bonds to produce stratified society of the haves and the have-nots. The social relations are determined by the mode of production and those who control it. Incidentally, the middle class whose empowerment appears not well-pronounced in Nigeria disappeared to leave a sharp distinction between the rich and the poor. Each and every individual, as well as families and groupings wants to get-rich-quick no matter what the source may be. Those who are rich want to get richer, and those poor also want to be rich - but of course, it is the poor families' labour and resources that is expropriated. The family known to be a potent influence in the development of the individual child and in its relationship to community life and by extension to school is now ridden with the curse of materialism. In the words of Oladele, what used to obtain as "the traditional sources of help such as the members of the extended family to which the troubled adolescent could turn to are gradually waning. Where they are available, they are inadequate in helping adolescent solve his/her education, vocational and personal social problem" (Oladele, 1987). Indeed, many families in Nigeria today don't care for their children other than the worship of material wealth to level up with the upper economic strata of the society. The phenomena have led to increasing divorces and broken houses, single parents all with the children lacking in parental discipline. In Ipaye (1980) cited by Oladele (1987) it has been observed that the stability and influence which the home, church and mosque used to wield are now weakening and it appears that the "Nigerian society is drifting to a situation whereby the school is being called upon to provide broad range of mental health and therapeutic services to the children, their parents, families and their teacher too" (Oladele, 1987). Accompanying this drift, which the crave for material wealth brought about has been excitement, anxiety and confusion whose reflection particularly in the personality of young adolescents today reveals a tale of woes, despair and frustrations. As per some shocking revelations, the often asked questions that circulate among youths whether of normal behaviour or those on the verge of dissipation are:

Such and such are our classmates or friends, and they have made it or have arrived by becoming rich, they are not better than us even in school -then why not us; what sins have we committed against the society; why should the society treat us unjustifiably; why should we continue to suffer while some of our peers are enjoying and spitting on us; why should we be in poverty while there is affluence all around? We also as free-born like others, also have equal right to the country's resources and therefore, wish to enjoy some parts of it (field Observation, Katsina, 10/03/2001; Oral Information, Sokoto 13/03/2001).

Much as these questions provoke thoughts in rational minds who could positively guess where the answers lay, the negative thinking in them appeals to innate grudges owing to myriads of social frustrations, which break loose the youths to committing armed robbery, arson and goondayism - a typical feature of our big cities. Now even villages identified with rich moneylenders and emerging middle-level business have not been spared from the spectre of armed robbery. The implication of this downward thinking caused by excessive materialism posits a strong challenge to counseling enterprise to disabuse the minds of the youth by reassuring them convincingly of the societal concern of their welfares and that of the general populace. Apparently, when the factor of materialism obstructs the youths in ways that make achieving self-fulfillment more difficult, it is instructive on the counseling personnel to recognize the need to resolve and reconcile these socio-economic, cultural and political conflicts prevalent in the modern age of our country Nigeria in the interest of the education of our potential future leaders.

Conclusion

Having gone through the available literature, oral information and field observation, we are of the conviction that indiscipline as opposed to discipline is rife in our educational institutions. The effect of this indiscipline was to engender cultism whose ramifications have been that of violence and general disturbances to the administration of institutions in Nigeria. It is however, clear that most of these problems owes to combine interactional forces emanating from within the larger society but working negatively against it. Under this unstable condition the pursuit of knowledge by students therefore, proves near- impossible. In the light of such developments it is inevitable that guidance and counseling hitherto a neglected area of study should be re-visited for positive future considerations. Hence, any attempt towards achieving corrective counseling according to Martins has to consider the fact that, "many acts by indiscipline (which encourages cultism) often carried out by students arise from failure to satisfy their basic instinct of survival. The answers to discipline problems should therefore not be got through legislations" (Martins, 1990) but through concerted efforts which needs a holistic approach to the whole issue as reminded and concluded by Ike in the following:

The task (i.e. of curbing indiscipline and cultism by extension) needs every hand to be on deck. The children are important to the solution of the problem. So are the parents, the elders in the society. The government also needs to pursue policies that aid discipline not only in the school but also in the society. And for all those who must now involve themselves in the restoration of discipline in our society, practical

example is better than preaching no matter how loudly these are done (Ike, 1990: 117).

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