

# Effects of Cultism on Youth Development in Rivers State: Containing the Menace and Cleaning the Mess

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This study examined the negative impacts of youth cult activities and cultism in Nigeria, emphasizing that combating cultism should be a collective responsibility rather than solely a government initiative. Cultism has increasingly infiltrated secondary schools, necessitating urgent action to contain and eradicate it. The study focused on the adverse effects of cultism on youth development in Rivers State, recognizing that complete eradication may not be immediately feasible due to its socio-psychological roots. Instead, a framework acknowledging the existence of fraternities on campuses and in society, while containing and regulating their activities, is more practical. Cultism represents a significant social challenge within the Nigerian educational system and society. Cultists often operate with firearms and other dangerous weapons, instilling fear and committing violent acts with impunity, sometimes supported by influential individuals. Such conflicts increasingly impact primary and secondary education, which is crucial for societal development. The study identified several factors contributing to the rise of secret cults, including the absence of positive male role models, erosion of societal values, irresponsible leadership, poverty, unemployment, and the acceptance of cultists in influential positions. Additionally, the commercial auto and bike transport industry, initially seen as a refuge, has become a hotspot for drug use and cult involvement, leading to security challenges and youth unrest. Recommended actions include encouraging parents to renounce cultism, providing education on its dangers, revitalizing societal values, enhancing the legal system, and improving law enforcement through better training and welfare. Involving all societal sectors in the fight against cultism is essential for long-term success.

**Keywords:** Secret Cults, Menace, Mess, Drugs, Charms, Weapons, National Union of Road Transport Workers.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Secret cults or confraternities in Nigeria are clandestine groups, particularly within educational institutions and urban centers, known for their involvement in violence and organized crime since the 1980s. In major cities such as Lagos, Port Harcourt, and other urban areas, these cults recruit teenagers and young adults into street gangs.

These gangs often serve as preliminary training for prospective members who may later join cults in tertiary institutions or, in some cases, involve those who cannot access higher education. Cult activities, both on campuses and in urban streets, range from oath-taking and violent rituals to burglary, rape, and other criminal acts.

These activities frequently involve the children of well-placed individuals and are commonly fueled by drugs like cocaine,

marijuana, mkpuru mmiri, and tramadol. Cultism significantly impacts educational standards, productivity, public safety, and social discipline. Cult groups typically follow a hierarchical structure similar to militia organizations, with coded language, symbols, and dress codes that are exclusive to members.

Members are enticed with promises of protection from rival gangs, academic success, social dominance, and financial gains. Despite being banned, these groups continue to thrive, particularly within tertiary institutions and suburban areas, where they still attract new recruits. Older, financially established members, including politicians and businessmen, often fund these cults, utilizing them as political thugs or for personal security.

The lack of positive role models, weak leadership, poverty, and widespread corruption also contribute to the rising cultism

among Nigerian youths. The commercial auto and bike transport sectors, viewed as refuges for unemployed youth, have also become breeding grounds for cult-related activities. Exiting cult membership is fraught with danger, as members who attempt to leave are often threatened or even killed.

Consequently, many youths remain lifelong members out of fear, living in constant anxiety of attacks from rival groups. Cultism has become entrenched in Nigerian society, perpetuated through generations and exacerbated by a lack of genuine governmental commitment to eradication.

The situation is further complicated by the activities of unions like the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), where cult-related violence has become commonplace. Political and community leaders, in some cases, indirectly support these groups by leveraging them for political gain, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence.

Rivers State has been chosen for this case study because it has the highest incidence of cult-related violence, as evidenced by Nexttier's 2023 Violent Conflict database. Areas such as Obele, Ndele, Ogbakiri, Rumuji, Elele, Khana, Tai, and Gokana LGAs are particularly affected, with prominent cult groups like the Iceland, Greenland, Supreme Vikings Confraternity, and others actively operating. The study seeks to analyze the socio-economic and psychological impacts of cultism on youth development while proposing practical strategies for mitigating the menace.

## 1.1 Objectives of the Study

Cultism has become a pervasive issue affecting the youth in Rivers State, Nigeria, significantly hindering their psychological, educational, and social development. The rise in cult-related activities has led to increased violence, academic disruptions, and moral decay among young individuals.

This study aims to assess the impact of cultism on youth development in Rivers State, identify the socio-economic and political factors driving its prevalence, and propose practical strategies for addressing this menace and rehabilitating those affected.

By pursuing these objectives, the research seeks to aid in formulating effective policies and interventions that can mitigate the negative effects of cultism and promote a safer and more progressive environment for youth development in the region.

1. To assess the impact of cultism on the psychological, educational, and social development of youths in Rivers State.
2. To identify the socio-economic and political factors fueling cultism among youths.
3. To propose practical strategies for curbing cultism and rehabilitating affected individuals

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Deliberative and Psychological Models:** Langone (1996) presented three models regarding joining a cult. They

are the deliberative model, the psychological model, and the thought reform model. In the "Deliberative Model," people join cults primarily based on their perceptions of a particular group.

He noted that this perspective is most favored among sociologists and religious scholars. In the "psychological model," which is popular with some health professionals, individuals choose to join to fulfill subconscious psychological needs. The "Thought Reform Model" posits that people join cults not due to their own psychological needs, but rather because of the group's influence through forms of psychological manipulation.

According to him, mental health experts with more direct experience with a large number of cultists tend to favor this view. Chambers (1998) argued that cults are groups that often exploit members psychologically and financially, typically by compelling members to comply with the leadership's demands through specific types of psychological manipulation, popularly known as mind control, and by fostering a deep-seated anxious dependency on the group and its leaders. Singer and Lalich (1995) described the following ways people can leave a cult:

- On their own decision (walkaways)
- Through expulsion (castaways)
- By intervention (exit counseling, deprogramming)
- By rebellion against the group's majority or leader

The Socialization Theory, Using the Learning by Imitation Model

According to Eguavoen (2006), socialization is the process through which cultural values, norms, behaviors, and skills characteristic of a society are transmitted to its young and potential members. This process is the principal means by which any society preserves its rich cultural heritage and achieves basic social conformity, both of which are important for ensuring the society's survival.

Aweriale (2005) explains that learning by imitation, also known as Bandura's theory, involves learning through observation. Students learn most behaviors quickly through this procedure, which involves imitation.

The imitation model of socialization is one in which learners themselves acquire roles, duties, and other values by copying and approximating the expected standards of behavior exhibited by their peers and, most importantly, by those they aspire to emulate—significant others (Eguavoen, 2006).

These significant others could be celebrities, actors, actresses, individuals within the neighborhood or community, or political figures, among others. Analytically, agencies of socialization, like the peer group and the school, facilitate learning and cultism.

The school, an agent of socialization, provides children or even young adults with a great deal of experience through learning. Teachers, non-academic staff, and various other arrangements within the school setting help socialize individuals. The school,

as an agent of socialization, has both formal and informal aspects.

**\*The peer group as an agent of socialization** is crucial in socializing the individual. Note that peer socialization is not always beneficial. Peer socialization can become dysfunctional, particularly when it propagates values that contradict the ones previously taught, a phenomenon known as cultism.

## 2.1 Overview of Cult Groups in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

A comprehensive enumeration of cult groups operating within Nigeria's higher institutions reveals a disturbing proliferation of secret cults. These groups, often organized as fraternities or confraternities, have become deeply entrenched in campus subcultures. Some of the most prominent among them include: Black Axe, Black Beret Fraternity, Black Bra, Buccaneers, Black Cats, Cappa Vendetta, Daughters of Jezebel, Eiye Confraternity, Green Beret Fraternity, Klu Klux Klan (KK) Confraternity, Knight Cadet, Maphites, Mgba Mgba Brothers, Musketeers Fraternity, Neo-Black Movement, Ostrich Fraternity, Panama, Pyrates Confraternity, Red Sea Horses, Royal Queens, Sea Dogs, Temple of Eden Fraternity, Sun Men, The Amazons, The Barracudas, The Canary, The Frigates, The Dragons, Himalayas, The Mafioso Fraternity, The Scorpion Fraternity, The Soires Fraternity, The Vikings, The Wairus, Third Eye Confraternity, Trojan Horse, Oasis of the Silhouette, Vipers, White Angels, Lucifer Knights, Mafians, Iceland, Degbam, and Dewell (Obamwonyi, 2004).

Further emphasizing the extent of this phenomenon, Ekeanyanwu and Igbinoba (2007) assert that there are currently no fewer than 53 active cult groups within Nigeria's tertiary education sector. Some of these include: Air Lords, Black Mamba, Buccaneers, Cappa Vendetta, Daughters of Jezebel, Eiye Confraternity, Green Beret Fraternity, Hard Candies, Jurist, King Cobra, Maphites, Mgba Mgba Brothers, Musketeers Fraternity, Red Berets, Ten Angels,

The Amazons, The Apostles, The Frigates, The Lynx, Viqueens, West End, among many others. These accounts highlight the widespread nature and variety of cult groups that pose significant challenges to campus safety, academic integrity, and institutional governance.

## 2.2 Reasons Why Youths Join Cult Groups

There are numerous and complex motivations behind why young people become involved in cult groups in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Key reasons include:

- **Peer Pressure:** Many youths are influenced by their peers to join cult groups.
- **Family Background:** Unstable or dysfunctional home environments can contribute to cult involvement.
- **Decline in Educational and Moral Values:** Weak moral and educational standards create a breeding ground for cultism.

- **Idleness:** A lack of engagement or purpose often drives students to seek a sense of belonging in cults.
- **Political Violence:** Exposure to violent political and electoral processes normalizes aggression.
- **Lack of Recreational Facilities:** Absence of safe, structured leisure options—such as sports complexes, gyms, and entertainment centers—leaves students vulnerable to negative influences.
- **Desire for Dominance and Power:** Some youths are attracted to the control and influence cults promise.
- **Need for Protection:** Fear of bullying or spiritual threats pushes students to seek safety within cult groups.
- **Desire for Social Acceptance:** Many join to avoid being seen as outsiders or to gain quick popularity.
- **Weak Law Enforcement:** Poor policing enables cult activities to thrive.
- **Economic Hardship:** Poverty and joblessness lead youths to view cults as a means of survival or quick gain.
- **Emotional Issues:** Anxiety, fear, and drug abuse can push individuals toward cultism.
- **Revenge and Frustration:** Personal grievances and a lack of justice motivate some to seek retaliation through cult violence.
- **Loss of Moral Values:** A deteriorated value system encourages lawlessness.
- **Monetary Gain:** Some join cults in pursuit of financial benefits.
- **Romantic Interests:** Attraction to or desire for attention from female students may also play a role.
- **Disregard for Truth and Discipline:** The current lack of respect for hard work, integrity, and proper conduct in society further fuels cult membership.

## 2.3 Effects and Consequences of Cultism

Cultism poses significant threats to educational institutions, national development, and societal peace. The harmful consequences are widespread and multifaceted, including:

- **Academic Disruption:** Cult clashes often lead to repeated closure of campuses and interruptions in the academic calendar, which prolong students' graduation timelines.
- **Violence and Insecurity:** Cult activities frequently involve violent confrontations, leading to loss of lives, injuries, and destruction of property.
- **Moral Decay:** Cultism fosters immorality, thuggery, robbery, and sometimes kidnapping among students.

- **Incarceration and Legal Issues:** Members are at constant risk of arrest, imprisonment, and sometimes fleeing school to avoid law enforcement.
- **Loss of Infrastructure:** Campus properties and resources are often damaged or destroyed during violent incidents.
- **Economic and Mental Impact:** Cultism leads to drug addiction, mental health issues, emotional breakdown, and death. It stunts innovation, productivity, and development while scaring away potential investors.
- **Threat to Families:** Sometimes, the family members of cultists become targets during leadership disputes or rival conflicts.
- **Loss of Personal Freedom:** Initiates often take oaths that strip them of personal liberty, binding them completely to the cult group.
- **Perpetual Fear:** Many cultists live in fear of retribution, arrest, or betrayal by fellow members.
- **Long-Term Consequences:** Even after leaving school or relocating, former members may still be hunted by rival groups, leading to lifelong insecurity.

## 2.4 Real-Life Incidents: The Growing Danger

Despite ongoing efforts to eradicate cultism, the menace continues to escalate. For example, in **Rivers State**, recent reports highlight the devastating impact:

- **Obele Community Tragedy (Port Harcourt, April 10, 2025):** A violent confrontation between cult groups resulted in the death of five individuals in Emohua Local Government Area.
- **Renewed Clashes (February 10, 2025):** At least 19 people were reportedly killed following a violent conflict between the **Deybam** and **Icelander** cult groups in the same community, causing widespread panic.

## 2.5 Efforts to Combat Cultism in Nigeria (with Emphasis on Rivers State)

Numerous strategies have been employed at both federal and state levels to curb the rise of cultism in Nigeria, particularly in educational institutions and urban centers like Rivers State. These efforts include:

- **Legislation and Policy:** The enactment of laws banning cultism and secret societies in educational institutions and the larger society has been central. These legal frameworks complement existing constitutional provisions on cult-related offenses. For instance, **Decree 47**, promulgated on December 27, 1989, under General Ibrahim Babangida's regime, authorized university governing councils to regulate student union activities and suppress cultism. Similarly, the **Rivers State Government** enacted a

law mandating **10 years imprisonment without the option of a fine** for anyone convicted of cultism.

- **Institutional Regulations:** New students in several institutions are now required to take an oath disavowing any association with secret cults. Anyone found to be a cult member faces **immediate expulsion**. In some cases, students publicly renounce cult membership, and individuals involved in cult-related crimes face prosecution and prison sentences.
- **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Civic education has been incorporated into school curricula to teach students about the dangers of cultism and other antisocial behaviors. Public enlightenment campaigns—via seminars, signposts, and media—also play a role in discouraging cultism.
- **Campus Security:** Security presence on campuses has been intensified through initiatives like the **Safe Schools Program**, deployment of **Man O' War corps**, and establishment of **permanent police outposts** within school premises. Some institutions have even introduced **anti-cultism squads** comprising students and security officers to monitor suspicious activity and respond promptly to threats.
- **Law Enforcement Initiatives:** Security agencies such as the **Anti-Cultism Unit**, **Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)**, and **Counter-Terrorism Units** of the Nigeria Police Force have been instrumental in tackling cult violence and apprehending offenders. In certain cases, bounties have been placed on notorious cultists to encourage public cooperation.
- **Institutional Actions:** Some universities have adopted stringent measures. For example, **Enugu State University of Science and Technology** expelled over 300 students suspected of cult membership or involved in fraudulent admissions between 2009 and 2014. These efforts were complemented by the regular presence of police and military personnel, especially during examinations.
- **Federal Government Directives:** Under **President Olusegun Obasanjo** in 2000, all Vice-Chancellors were given a **three-month deadline** to eliminate cultism from their institutions.
- **State-Specific Responses (Lagos State):** Due to its dense urban population, Lagos has also experienced challenges with cultism. In response, Governor **Babajide Sanwo-Olu** has significantly boosted the state's security apparatus. His administration restructured the **Rapid Response Squad (RRS)** and provided security gear worth **₦8.7 billion** to the state police. In 2021, he signed the **Prohibition of Unlawful Societies and Cultism Bill** into law, stipulating a **21-year jail term** for convicted cultists. Furthermore, the **Lagos State House of Assembly** passed a law in February 2021 prescribing a **15-year sentence** for anyone aiding cultists or allowing their



property to be used for cult meetings. This law replaces the **2007 Cultism Prohibition Law** and broadens the legal scope beyond students to include the general public.

- **Preventive Measures by Institutions:** The **University of Benin** mandates all admitted students to submit an affidavit affirming they are not cult members as part of the registration process.

Despite all these efforts—legal, educational, security-related, and institutional—cultism remains a pressing issue in Nigeria. In some cases, allegations have emerged implicating university administrators in supporting cult groups to suppress opposition, undermining genuine reform efforts. The persistence of cult violence reflects the deep-rooted nature of the problem, necessitating sustained and collective action from government, institutions, civil society, and communities alike.

## 2.6 Empirical Review on Cultism

Research has indicated that many student-led peaceful demonstrations have been hijacked by unidentified individuals, often cult members, who use the opportunity to incite chaos and violence. This has frequently resulted in the loss of lives—both cult members and innocent students—as well as extensive property damage. Such disruptions have led to the temporary closure of institutions, undermining the smooth operation and goals of universities (Eneh, 2008; Alanamu, Olanrewaju & Muhammed, 2018).

By 2003, it was estimated that over 5,000 students and lecturers had lost their lives due to cult-related violence and conflicts across various Nigerian universities (Okwu, 2006).

Additionally, in 2018, the Lagos State Commissioner of Police paraded more than fifteen underage secondary school students suspected to be part of a cult group. These teenagers were allegedly involved in intimidating their peers and school authorities (Oguntade, 2018).

The continued activities of secret cults, not just in schools but in broader Nigerian society, have had devastating effects on the population, affecting people of all ages (Eneh, 2008). Despite numerous initiatives to suppress cultism, the trend appears to be worsening, especially in tertiary institutions, where incidents continue to rise daily.

According to Chebli, Kallon, Harleston, and Mansaray (2007), key factors driving students into cult membership include peer pressure, the desire to belong, political motivations, financial incentives, job prospects, and opposition to perceived administrative bias. In many cases, students engage in cult-related violence to assert dominance, especially during student union elections.

Mgbekem (2004) points out that parental indulgence is also a contributing factor. Some parents overprotect their children and fail to discipline them when necessary. As a result, these children grow up lacking accountability and often develop deviant behaviors, which may eventually lead them into cultism.

Eziali (2000), as cited by Ogidefa, suggests that students often turn to cultism in pursuit of responsibility, fulfillment, and social identity. For instance, some students may see cultism as a way to fight perceived injustices on campus or to fulfill personal needs and ambitions.

Oshodomo (1999) asserts that some students seek out cult groups for recognition, protection from societal sanctions, or as a way to cope with past traumatic experiences, particularly within the family. Some join cults out of frustration, while others are drawn by financial benefits or use it as a cover for low self-esteem and personal inadequacies.

Ogunbamem (1997) laments that Nigerian society has, whether deliberately or inadvertently, created an environment conducive to crime, including the growth of campus cults. He also notes a moral decline, where dishonorable behavior has become normalized, replacing the values of integrity and accountability.

## 3.0 CONCLUSION

Cultism is largely the result of parental neglect, deteriorating societal values, the unchecked abuse of hard drugs, and systemic issues such as unemployment, lack of credible role models, greed, and the overwhelming desire for quick wealth. Other contributing factors include the activities of groups like the National Union of Road Transport Workers and the inefficiency of the judiciary.

Despite various governmental interventions, cultism continues to plague both educational institutions and society. Therefore, all sectors of society must join forces to confront and eliminate this threat. A key strategy is for educational authorities to launch robust awareness programs highlighting the dangers and long-term consequences of cultism.

## 4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

To significantly reduce the impact of cultism in schools and society at large, a multi-dimensional approach involving all segments of society is essential. This should include interventions at the family, educational, religious, governmental, and community levels.

i. Government bodies, NGOs, religious organizations, and media outlets should engage in widespread advocacy against cultism. These campaigns should take place at all educational levels through public awareness initiatives such as seminars, workshops, symposiums, posters, flyers, public lectures, radio and TV jingles, and social media content. NGOs, in particular, should function as watchdogs, ensuring law enforcement and public officials are held accountable.

ii. Promoting accountability must become a societal norm. Holding individuals responsible for their actions, particularly in public office, would deter misconduct and promote ethical leadership. The judiciary must be reformed and staffed with individuals of unquestionable integrity—rather than those seeking personal gain—to ensure justice is delivered without fear or favor.

iii. Individuals known to be members of secret cults should be barred from holding public office. Those currently in such positions should be required to publicly renounce their affiliation. This sends a clear message that cultism and leadership do not go hand-in-hand. Parents should also take an active role in monitoring and guiding their children's behavior both at home and in public.

iv. School administrations must strictly enforce policies against cultism, substance abuse, gambling, drunkenness, and indecent dressing. New students—from nursery to tertiary levels—should undergo compulsory guidance and counseling courses, with exams that must be passed before graduation. Schools should also implement the “safe schools” initiative, with dedicated teams tasked with identifying and reporting suspected cult members, including staff. States should set up rehabilitation centers to support those already involved in cultism or drug abuse.

v. Community leadership should be entrusted to individuals of proven integrity who genuinely care about the welfare of their people, not political cronies. Such leaders should actively identify and discipline cult members within their jurisdictions, serving as examples to deter others. Law enforcement agencies should be engaged in handling more complex cases.

vi. Security personnel must be adequately trained, equipped, and fairly compensated. Any officer found violating the law should be punished appropriately, with no room for favoritism or impunity.

vii. Laws prohibiting cult membership and activities should be enforced consistently at all levels. Equal application of the law will enhance public confidence in the government's commitment to eradicating cultism, which often serves as a breeding ground for terrorism.

viii. The government should thoroughly examine the operations of the National Union of Road Transport Workers and its affiliated bodies nationwide. A structured framework—backed by legislation from the National Assembly—should be developed to regulate their activities effectively.

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