Economic Survival and Campus Cultism: Towards a Reconceptualization of Violence on Nigerian Universities

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Purpose: While it is true that concern should be expressed with the incessant conflicts in Africa, it is also true that the ramifications are very wide. One recurring conflict in the 1990s Nigeria's educational institutions is the conflict generated among rival cult groups that seemed to defy solution. Several students and, in some cases, lecturers have lost their lives yet there seems to be no end to these killings which seem to occur unexpectedly.

Methodology: Applying a sub-cultural group theory, this article analyzed the prevalent factor responsible of this phenomenon. Starting with the analysis of the relations between what it takes to survive in Nigeria and the emergence of violence on campuses of institutions of higher learning, the article suggests that the failure of higher institutions to effectively perform its integrative role, thereby becoming a space for delinquent gang groups, may be connected to failed economic policies.

Findings: it argues that it may not be totally true to call the various students groups involved in the on-campus conflict 'cult' as their activities and rituals are devoid of any spiritual or religious elements but more about contestations about space and survival. It concludes by suggesting some probable solutions.

Conclusion: the educational institution needs to rethink the curricula in relation to the survival of the society wherein what is taught is not based on 'individualistic but communal virtues.

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1.   Introduction

Two ideas cut across scholarly discuss on campus cultism in Nigerian higher institutions of learning. One is the trend towards historiography of the origin and development of cultism, which is often analysed focusing on the 'cult' related activities from non-violence to the proliferation of splinter secret cult groups (Alumona & Amusan, 2019, Fayokun, 2011; Eguavoen, 2008). The other idea is the worrisome violence, economic banditry and inter-cult 'wars' – fuelled mostly by pecuniary pursuit and supremacy – which has now become the primary preoccupations of most campus cult groups (Nyiayaana, 2012; Ololube, Agbor & Iriah, 2013; Kpangban, Umudhe & Ajaja, 2008; Gboyega, 2005). Hence, contemporary splinter campus cult groupings are into economic opportunism and are available as hired-hands.

Viewed in the light of these two ideas, two recent trends in student's 'cultism' scholarship in Nigerian higher institutions become interrelated. One, the numbers of secret cult groups in institution of higher learning has been increasing since the 1970s and 1980s relative to the downward trend in economic growth (Udoh and Ikezu, 2015). Two, splinter campus cult groups have clearly departed from the social organization-like model of earlier confraternity whose objective was to challenge societal decay. According to Oyefara (2004) from 1972 when Buccaneers broke rank with the Pyrate Confraternity the proliferations and the activities of the splinter groups that emerged have been less than noble. A recent publication by IFRA-NIGERIA (2019) state that:

In the course of time, the characters of the cultist groups have been taking newer and newer dimensions with increasing complexities and implications on human rights (forced prostitution, sexual exploitation, human trafficking), criminality (armed robbery, thefts) and political instability (political thuggery, politically-motivated assassination, electoral fraud) as well as other delinquency and social nuisance (IFRA-NIG, 2019: 2)

Though, demographics and increase in yearly students in-take by universities across the country may possibly explain the proliferations of splinter cult groups (IFRA, 2019; Nnajieto and Ahamefula, 2015), it does not suggest why they transmogrified into a more or less economic bandit.

2.   Methodology

In this paper, we argue that the struggle for survival in the Nigerian space and the decay in university learning environment play an important role in the supposed war in the universities in the 1990s. In other words, is it not possible to observe a direct relationship between what it takes to survive in the Nigerian society and its educational institutions? Is the problem really with what has come to be defined as 'cultism' or the emergence of a subculture to counter societal ideals? Can the 'wars' be stopped or, at least, curbed, without an understanding of change in a developing economy?

3.   Findings

To attempt providing answers to these questions, the paper is located within the subculture theories which emerged as explanations to the special problems that the members of delinquent subcultures create to respond to mainstream society. These theories attempted to analyze the historical problems that peaked urbanization of the 1950s in the United States brought about and leading to a "we-they" explanation of deviant behaviour. For us however, the 'middle-class' versus 'lower-class' is not put to use because, in defining deviant behaviour for developing nations, the question of class is a contentious phenomenon. More importantly, we perceive the students as a group, represented by the student union executive, which sees itself as constituting, if we may say, 'a group in and for itself' against the society/the authorities such that there does not seem to be a clear-cut differentiation among students. Indeed, the group coerces all students to conform and deviation from group norms is sanctioned. However, with the breakdown in the ability of the student group, through its leaders, to defend students' interests, subculture groups emerged attempting to, or proclaiming itself as, the 'conscience' of the group, albeit, contrary to laid down societal or authorities' rules and regulations.

In discussing these issues, we begin by outlining how failed economic policies oriented towards modernization principle have meant that survival for ordinary African people become challenging and how this has prepared fertile ground for different forms of conflict situations in different parts of Africa including in the African universities. Particularly salient here is the fact that the absence of inclusive governance, especially as it relates to the university systems, and emergence of splinter cultist groups as extra state agents. In the second and third sections, we explore why, in spite of its integrative role, the Nigerian universities and the society at large failed to prevent the emergence of splinter cultist groups and reduced their nefarious activities. The section that follows interrogated the idea of 'cultism' at least as uncritically used in many scholarly works. Through this we then attempt a reconceptualization of cultism and the 'war' they engage in on Nigerian university campus. The result is that the Nigerian social context with respect to the expected integration of the individuals into the economic and political institutions, run parallel to the existential realities of the university students even as they form groups outside the emerging structure as counter the mainstream culture of the society. Our position, then, goes beyond a particularly, analytical example of cultism on the Nigeria campus. Essentially, personal observations and secondary data constitute the methods employed in the analysis of this phenomenon.

Economic Situations and Campus Violence

Poverty and, perhaps part of its explanation, socio-economic and political instabilities are characteristic features of African societies. Both the economic indicators and ideas with which to manage the society reflect appalling images. Thus, one persistently wonders whether there is any hope for development in the nearest future. Yet, it seems abundantly clear that with the enormous human and natural resources, the future has not eluded the continent (Falola, 2018). Indeed, it is almost clear that once the ideas with which to manage the society are effectively put in place, the development of Africa is inevitable. Ironically, such ideas seem to be lacking most especially because the economic policies, which have constituted the foundation on which the society is organized, are disjointed from indigenous social realities. These economic policies, informed by the modernization theory of 'catching up' with the developed nations, do not consider the reverberations/ consequences of modernization which the developed nations experienced and for which social welfare policies were instituted.

On the contrary, especially because such policies were instituted by the military, in most instances, and, more importantly, because economic growth does not imply development, the socio-economic and political inequalities resulting from such policies have compounded the African situation. With the interest, and perhaps religious fervor, in economic growth, socio-economic and political instabilities have been the hallmark of the African continent. This has been clearly shown by Rubenstein (1996) who argued that ethnic, racial, and religious conflicts are generated and exacerbated by the failures of the free-market system. As such, argues Barbanti Jr. (2003-2005), for conflict resolution to be possible, there is a need for major structural changes in terms of the international influences redefining development not only in terms of economic growth but also engendering greater equity, reducing poverty and the creation of reliable institutional arrangements. These entail an abandonment of the free-market economy; the establishment of democratic institutions that can guarantee minimum standards of transparency from the government through the respect for peoples' preferences as well as taking account of the vulnerable groups who cannot effectively represent themselves or be heard. This is almost impossible within the neo-liberal economy with its basis in the "survival of the fittest". It is in the process of this competition for survival, argues Nnoli (1998) that ethnic, and indeed the other forms of, conflict can be explained and understood.

The list of these conflicts is almost insurmountable! From Angola where more than half a million has been killed and an estimate of about 3million refugees; to the horn of Africa, in Somalia, where the lack of a central government has allowed for low-level conflicts, chronic economic weakness and, therefore, vulnerability to external interference and source of regional instability due to border skirmishes between Ethiopia and Eritrea leading to full scale war in 1999. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, (DR Congo), what Porteos (2004)

dubbed Africa's First World War, involving six neighbouring states of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, and Angola, is taking place. As at 2003, Porteos (2004), citing a published estimate, over 4million people in DR Congo, alone, directly or indirectly, have been killed in the war since 1996. Unfortunately, the victims are mainly civilians!

In West Africa, the late 1990s witnessed a complexity of conflicts in Sierra Leone lasting over a decade; Liberia was a theatre of war in the early 1990s; Nigeria, apart from the civil war which ended, officially, in 1967, under the military dictatorships of Generals Babangida and Abacha, from the mid-1980s, ethnic and religious tensions thrived with, unfortunately, manifest negative impacts on the nation's educational institutions, and latently, negative consequences of Boko Haram insurgence on all social institutions have been overwhelming (Perouse de Montclos, 2014). For these nations, as for Nigeria, there seems to be no end in sight for quelling these conflicts.

In fact, for Nigeria, with which we are concerned in this paper, the situation looks ominous as the 'wars'/conflicts seem to be uncontrollable with the involvement of students even since 1999 when the civilian government was 'democratically' elected. Indeed, since the late 1980s, though most apparent in the 1990s, the students have started to use guns, chemicals, axes, machetes and so on to attack each other and even their lecturers. Many have been wounded, maimed and killed! In fact, some affluent students have had to migrate outside Nigeria for their studies, becoming, more or less, refugees in other countries. The expected 'citadels of learning' have become 'theatres of war'. The educational institutions that are supposed to be, according to Dike (2002), places for 'character formation, acquisition of knowledge and skills' to prepare students for the world of work and, perhaps, politics, have become centers for character 'deformation', or is it 'reformation'. It has also become centre for acquisition of violent and military skills and knowledge for survival in the larger society.

Education as an Integrative Institution

Even in pre-capitalist socio-economic formations, the educational institution, though located in the family of procreation, is fundamental to the socialization of the youth. Though informal, the youth are taught how to survive within the larger society by the family. Indeed, the family taught the child not only the culture of the people but also the skills required to live. Through this process, values are sustained and recreated for self-definition and reproduction. It helped to impart knowledge about the preservation and extension of knowledge for progress and development. This process became more apparent and real in the capitalist social formation as the educational institution was separated from the family. The industrial capitalist now defines what it requires to survive in the new economic institution. Since the industrial revolution, this process has continued to be perpetuated and the family, especially in Europe and the United States America, has been consistently dissociated from defining what it takes to survive in the economic sphere. As such, the skills needed in the industry now determine what the individuals must be taught in the formal educational institution. These are thus the new skills encapsulated in new norms and values guiding 'appropriate' behaviour.

It was these skills, and norms and values, that the colonialists attempted to introduce as the 'modernizing' principle for the creation of small class of bureaucrats needed to help run the colonial administration. However, rather than the acquisition of skills in technology created from within the environment of the colonized people, colonial education 'skewed the incentives of learning for the African' by shifting the focus of education from its human development potential to its 'prestige function' acknowledging the improvement of status enhancement rather than the means by which the environment is to be critically appreciated with a view to bringing about progress and development (Nwuzuruigbo, 2017; Falola, 2008; Ake, 1981). More importantly, these bureaucrats became the inheritors of the colonial legacy perpetuating the 'modernizing' principle of aping the former overlords to the extent that even crops that generate cash-'cash crops'- became the preserve for the educated while food-farming was neglected and the task of the uneducated. Securing a job in the European-based institutions, both in the civil service and the companies, became the new fad and

the era of 'paper certificate' began, therefore during the colonial period and was only perpetuated during independence (Onlinenigeria, 11.8. 2019). In fact, it is clear that even those who fought and secured political independence were mainly the educated elites who came to relegate the indigenous rural capitalists (Hutchful, 2002).

In short, by the time the University College London satellite, at Ibadan, was established in 1948, those who secured admission knew their eventual social, economic and political statuses. They were people on whom governance and economic advantages were already, almost, assured. Their lot was to be 'white-collar' jobs rather than the tedious agricultural orientation. Even if they were to farm, theirs was not to be that of using hoes and cutlasses but imported mechanized instruments, fertilizers, herbicides, and so on. Thus the farm settlement schemes were established for them. And since the aim was to 'modernize', that is, to be like the colonialists, more Universities had to be created with the same orientation for the political elites to justify their new found status at independence. As such, by 1960, the Eastern Region government established its own University at Nsukka, while the Federal government also established the University of Lagos in 1962- the year in which the Western and Northern Regions established theirs at Ile-Ife and Zaria respectively. In 1970, the newly created region-Midwest- also established its own University of Benin. It was, indeed, a competition under the pretext that there was a need for the creation of manpower to take-over from the departing Europeans. These six Universities, according to Jibril (2004), are still referred to as first-generation universities.

With the military incursion into politics, the federal government, in its centralizing role, took over the regional universities in 1975 and established seven new ones during the 1975-1977 plan period without, in any way, changing the 'modernizing' orientation of their civilian and colonial counterparts. Yet, states continued to establish their own universities so that, by 1979, when the military exchanged the baton of governance with the civilians, there were 29 universities and polytechnics in Nigeria- not counting the colleges of education. As of December 2019, Nigeria had about 170 universities of which 43 were federal, 48 were state owned, and 79 (with more undergoing process of approval by the National University Commission) private universities (NUC, 2019).

As is obvious, the Federal government still continues to control large ownership of universities and, almost six decades after independence, the orientation is still to create manpower for the economy. Ironically, however, unemployment rate has continued to increase and retrenchment of staff is an on-going process. In fact, by 1963, students at the University of Ibadan, according to Ojetunde (1969) cited by Klineberg, Zavallioni, Louis-Guerin and Benbrika (1979) had started to raise issues about the student-teacher relationship, the devaluation of their certificates and the rupture in relationship between the parents who could not offer their children higher education began to manifest.

Thus, the generational conflict had started to manifest almost four decades ago especially with the dissolution of the family reinforced by life-styles of young people influenced by Western norms, while the family unit remains often poorly educated (in the Western sense) and traditional. Indeed, 1950, at Ibadan, witnessed the collusion between the perception of the students as "pampered adults" and "tax-payers' suckers" by the public over the students' demonstration against the installation of barbed wire around the dormitories. By 1968, due to poor relationships between the students, violently demanding to freely participate in social activities, and the university administration, at Ife, the university was closed for three weeks by the military administration. According to the Guerin and Benbrika (1979) 'these rebellions, (among others) were directed more against the government than against the universities, not because the students were politically conscious and involved, but because this was the only battlefield acceptable to the general population. The government was seen as responsible for the lack of job openings'. Yet, though these were not seen as students' movements, they marked the beginning of the establishment of, it seems, the 'only battlefield acceptable to the general population'. Unfortunately, this battlefield is being expanded with more deprivations and, as Adunbi and Nwanguma (2002), found out, more "covert repressions". Indeed, such repressions seem to have informed

the explosion of what was not seen as students' movements but now in form of unregistered violent student groupings especially as the deprivations increased.

The deprivations have been most obvious with the level of poverty that has brought Nigeria to the last 29th ranking in United Nations' Human Development Index in spite of its human and natural resources. The population living below $2 a day between 1990-2003 is 90.8% in spite of the Gross Domestic Product of $428 showing gross inequality in income or consumption where 10% of the share of income or consumption of the richest 10% is 40.8% and 20% (of the same group) with 55.7% whereas it is only 1.6% and 4.4% for the respective poor categories. (UNDP: Human Development Index 2005). Indeed, when compared with Ghana, Cote D'voire, and Kenya whose resources are far below that of Nigeria, they commit a higher proportion of their Gross National Product and total public expenditure on education (Jega,n.d.). The lack of funding, among other factors, have therefore contributed to low access to education with only 49% of Nigerians having access to formal education and only 20% with access to University education (Bandele, n.d.). In fact, as Jibril (2004) posited, even with the significant improvement in the funding of tertiary education in the year 2000, 'current funding levels are low and lead to poor remuneration for academic staff'. This situation becomes more pathetic when less than 20% of students seeking admission to universities have access (Jegede, 2000). The implication here is that only that percentage, if they are able to complete their education successfully, would occupy top positions in the economy and politics of the nation. Ironically, however, less than this percentage are able to even secure lower job positions after graduation.

As implied in the previous paragraph, students' groupings started to question the government's inability to satisfy their employment needs since the 1950s, it may not, therefore, be surprising that most authors that have contributed to the 'cult' problem in Nigeria's educational institutions located the origin within this period. Yet it is startling that the groupings that emerged during this period up to the early 1980s were not, then, referred to as 'cults'. It was not until the 'wars' on the university campuses started in the late 1980s that the word 'cultism' surfaced as the explanation for this rather new phenomenon. It thus becomes imperative to question the meaning of cultism that has been attached to this new social reality. We now turn to this in the next section.

Campus 'Cultism': Towards a Reconceptualisation

Rather than the somewhat inadequate critical examination of the concept-cultism-characterizing Nigerian literature with respect to the 'wars' on university campuses, it is important to realize that the concept is not 'Nigerian' but a global concept. For this reason, this section attempts to, though briefly, present its universality.

In recent times, any group gathering for any 'unconventional' religious or social purpose tends to be labeled a 'cult' (Adidam, 2005). Yet Miller (2001), a former Dean of Student Services, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington, apart from identifying the United States as a 'land of cults', observed that these cults are mostly situated within a religious organization and even within Orthodox Churches. This is in spite of the fact that the term has taken on a 'pejorative and sometimes offensive connotation' (Ushe, 2019) such that it now has a negative meaning and is generally applied to a group by its opponents for various reasons. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Singer and Lalich (1995) identified 3000 to 5000 cults in the United States even when the majority so labeled protest against such.

Originally, the word derived from the Latin word -'cultus'-meaning worship or devotion. Such devotion was then centered on a local god through who expected ways of behavior derived for the devotees and, indeed, the local people. It was a life that however required not just the veneration of the god but also a certain type of 'inequality' among the practitioners (Adelola, 1997; Aguda, 1997). Rather than perceiving a cult as 'individualistic than other organized forms of religion because it lacks a fixed doctrine' (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004: p.425) therefore, the pre-Christian era denoted a religious aspect of culture wherein there were social inequalities in all social institutions-including religion-within which 'experts', who were

perceived as 'understanding' the gods, performed rituals towards the satisfaction of their clients/devotees' needs. These experts were part of organized social institutions.

With the emergence and predominance of Christianity, especially in the West and its consequent globalization, 'non-Christian' religious groups are now referred to as 'cults' and 'fetish'. In this way, Christianity, through its accepted leaders, became the yardstick for measuring 'harmful' cults without purging itself of its historical antecedents. Since at least the 1940s therefore, orthodox, conservative or fundamentalist Christians included those religious groups who used 'non-standard' translations of the bible, apply additional revelation on a similar or higher level than the bible or had practices deviant from those of traditional Christianity as cults. This is part of why it is difficult to define the word 'cult' as it is now subjective (Barret, 2001; Edby, 1999). Therefore, applying the cult concept to violent activities among Nigerian University students becomes suspect, without investigating their religious beliefs and practices. In other words, since cultism cannot be clearly dissociated from religion, to what extent do these groups deviate from, for that matter, any mainstream religious movement?

Just as in most studies in the social sciences, the study of the 'wars' on University campuses seem to be influenced by pecuniary factors (Gottliem, 1973). As such, it is not surprising that though these groups existed since the 1950s in Nigeria (Rotimi, 2005; Ogunbameru, 1997) empirical inquiries did not begin until the 1990s. Perhaps, however, this neglect may have been due to the fact that the 'wars' in which these groups engage began around this period leading to the disruptions in academic calendars. Apart from the maiming and killings of members and non-members-including staff members- the parents, the media, and the lecturers seem to be most affected with regards to their lives and that of their wards. Of somewhat subtle relevance is the 'publish or perish syndrome' into which the academic staff and the media seem to have boxed themselves such that the empirical inquiry they claim to have undertaken seem baseless and often subjective resulting in, sometimes, meaningless findings and recommendations. The facelessness, non-captive and fear the groups instill further compound the situation thus raising methodological issues and challenges. Of utmost significance, therefore, is the uncritical conceptualization schema for analyzing the groups' activities bothering on the non-recognition of spiritual undertone in cultism. Except in their initiation processes, which involves only the swearing to the oath of allegiance and secrecy, the religious content is nil! Interestingly, even such 'oaths' are devoid of any expected effect. In their operations, which are before and during the 'war', no god or spirit is conjured! In short, with regards to religious beliefs and practices, these are not cults! But what are they?

Without delving too deeply into the historical information concerning these groups, which many other competent sources have dealt with, (see especially Owoeye, 1997 and Adelola, 1997), one can clearly differentiate, in broad outlines, two major types. The first type consists of groups set up for certain specific purposes and their variants. Included in this are the "Pyrates Confraternity" established to confront the 'colonial mentality' which the University seemed to be perpetuating. Its splinter groups are the "Buccaneer confraternity" and the "Eiye confraternity". The Neo-Black Movement (NBM) is another but different example within this group established to defend the rights of the Blacks with the specific aim of creating awareness concerning what was happening in the then Southern Africa before independence. They not only commemorate the Sharpeville day but also identify with the freedom fighters by assuming their names. The other major group consists of those that emerged in the late 1980s into the early 1990s to date attempting to ape the first group for various reasons. These, essentially, may be said to have emerged as a result of the educational decay from the mid-1980s. Thus, such reasons as: "need for security"; "peer group influence"; "academic short-circuiting"; "economic reasons"; "futuristic endeavors"; "parental influence"; among others, may suffice as explanations for the existence of this latter group though some of these factors have become relevant for the first group.

The inclusion of these latter factors in the first group seems to have been informed by the rivalry/ competition for relevance in the scheme of things more so when the bases of their existence have been eroded. Thus, competition for space may even be as ridiculous as disagreement over female acquaintances. Nonetheless,

these groups also seem to derive their continued relevance, especially the first, from the head start they had over the second. Many of their members have become relevant in the academic, in politics and, indeed, in the economy, many of whom render assistance to their members that are still in school. It is not therefore surprising that the 'wars' are often between this first group as they contest for supremacy among themselves. Just like gangs, (Taylor, 2013; Grant & Feimer, 2007; Yablonsky, 1997) as they may be called, with the metamorphosis that have taken place, these groups have their own symbols, hand signs, rituals and slang with which they ensure interaction and conformity. Members seem to now organize themselves against societal norms as they engage in accepted activities outside societal recommendations. They are now involved in the 'get-rich-quick syndrome' such as 'internet scam' and international economic crimes apart from engaging in armed robbery. Depending on their seeming success (es), their colleagues try to emulate them by joining the group or forming theirs which explains the proliferation of the gangs.

4.   Conclusion

Any analysis of the African situation that underemphasizes the colonial epoch cannot clearly grasp the historical and sociological context. What this paper has tried to show is the fact that the colonial contact, creating a new socio-structural arrangement, through the new and imported educational institution distorted the developmental orientation prevalent in pre-colonial Africa. With a new orientation created to imitate imported ideas, the African problems emanating have been in tandem with the experiences of their erstwhile colonial masters. Unfortunately, the ability to manage these problems in Africa is limited because the dependency has become structural thus there is a need for a fundamental transformation of the existing social structure. To do this, the educational institution needs to rethink the curricula in relation to the survival of the society wherein what is taught is not based on 'individualistic but communal virtues. From here, it becomes easier for the products to realize that they are not superior to those without formal education. It is expected that with this reorientation, those with formal education would be taught 'from within' rather than the thirst to ape the 'west'.

Consequently, the need to critically assess what is 'given' becomes the norm and this is what this paper has attempted to do by interrogating the erroneous conceptualization of the 'wars' in the University without which solution would be warped, as it seems to have always been. By understanding that these groups are 'gangs', the solution becomes clearer. The inequality problems need to be addressed if gangsterism is to be curbed.

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