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Cultism and Democracy Made Easy: The Cabal Theory in the Nigerian Politics, 1999-2009 (Pp162-173)

Uweru, Bethel Chuks –Professor, Criminology and Security Studies, Department of Intelligence and Security Studies, Novena University Ogume, Delta State- Nigeria

E-mail: uwerubethel@yahoo.com
Phone: +234803-486-8042; +234805-552-6565

Abstract

Generally speaking, a cult, in traditional societies, is a set of practices and beliefs of a group, in relation to a local god, for example, Owegbe or Ogboni cults. In these environments, cults or secret societies are formed to alleviate feelings of deprivation which may be economic, psychological, physical or mental. In scientifically-oriented cultures, cults or secret societies have little or no meaning except when their activities border on attitudinal discrimination against certain ethnic minorities. For example, in the Untied States, members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) have expressed their prejudice against Blacks, Jews, Catholics through verbal, physical and psychological harassment. In Hegelian thought or logic, cult membership can be said to be a negation. Using ex-post facto research, backed by some ethnography, the study found that between 1999 and 2009 the political process in Nigeria has elevated cultism to criminal activities and political thuggery, fuelling a cabal theory. The Cabal makes the conduct of free and fair elections impossible, thereby distorting the doctrine of liberal democracy as exemplified in the April 25, 2009 re-run of the governorship election in Ekiti state of Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, cults, cabal theory, delinquent state.

Introduction

In anthropology, a *cult* is a set of practices and beliefs of a group, in relation to a local god, for example, Owegbe or Ogboni cults. In sociology, it is a small group of religious activities, whose beliefs are typically syncretic, esoteric, and individualistic. Although it is related to the concept of religious sect, cult is not in Western society associated with mainstream Christianity. It has no precise scientific meaning because it is often difficult to dissociate the idea of a cult from its commonsense pejorative significance. Cult practices appear to satisfy the needs of alienated sections of urban, middle-class youth. Cult membership amongst young people is typically transitory, spasmodic and irregular.

Origin of Sects and Cults

Humans have always wondered about their existence and purpose on earth. According to Tylor (1871/1958), the founder of the anthropology of religion, our ancestors – and contemporary non-industrial peoples – were particularly intrigued with death, dreaming, and trance. In dreams and trances, people see images they may remember when they wake up or come out of the trance state. Tylor concluded that attempts to explain dreams and trances led early humans to believe that two entities inhabit the body: one active during the day and the other (soul) active during sleep and trance states. Although they never meet, they are vital to each other. When the soul leaves the body, the person dies. Death is departure of the soul. From the Latin for soul, *anima*, Tylor named this belief *animism*. For Tylor, *animism*, the earliest form of religion, was a belief in spiritual beings.

Religion a social institution, evolved through stages, beginning with animism and followed with *polytheism*. Polytheism is belief in many gods with equal or relatively similar power. Hindu gods are often tribal, village, or caste deities associated with a particular place – a building, field, or mountain – or a certain object such as an animal or a tree. *Monotheism* is belief in a single, all – powerful god or deity. People who subscribe to this faith have established religious organizations, religious leaders or priests, traditional rituals and sacred writings.

Like all social institutions, religion has had to adapt to changing conditions of the modern world. Many scholars have argued that religion's adaptation has resulted in a long, continuous decline in its influence (Martin, 1978; Hammond, 1985). In supporting this view, Peter Berger (1977) has suggested that the only important sphere of influence that religion has today in modern

societies is in the family (rather than in the community) – that is, on a personal level of experience. Following the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850), religion has been separated from government, from education, and from the marketplace. It is no longer the primary cohesive force in societies, having been displaced by nationalism and other secular and political ideologies. The process by which society and culture become separated from religious connections and influences is called *secularization*. (The opposite of secularization is *sacralization*, which occurs when social and cultural life become more religious and sacred in character).

The decline of religion as an institution led to a new religious movements in the form of *sects* and *cults*. Institutional religions ceased to claim a monopoly of the religious truth. This led to religious pluralism where people can believe whatever they choose and need not follow a single set of teaching (Bruce, 2002). Religious sects and cults reject some aspect of established religion. Such religious groups as the Presbyterians, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses all began as sects. Sects that survive tend to move away from their pure state and become new churches or denominations. In the course of their evolution, sects may even come to resemble the organizations from which they originally separated. As sects grow larger, they tend to become increasingly bureaucratic, the result is that the sect's initial spontaneity and flexibility begin to disappear. And as the sect becomes more like a church, members dissatisfied with doctrine or dogma may break away yet again to found a new sect (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Historically, cults are headed by strong, flamboyant leaders such as Jim Jones of the People's Temple of Guyana in South America. In recent times, the People's Temple is an example of a cult that evolved from an extreme but traditional Pentecostal religious sect (Bainbridge & Stark, 1979). As the cult evolved and grew in popularity, Jones, a self-styled prophet, developed increasingly radical view on society and religion. Jones moved his members from the United States to an isolated environment in Guyana to eliminate threats to his leadership and to increase his power. In the Temple, suicide rituals had been developed earlier as a way for his supporters to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment. When Jones came to believe that his cult would be destroyed as a result of the murder of a visiting United States congressman, he ordered – and forced – his entire community to make a suicidal self-sacrifice. As a result, nearly a thousand of his members

committed mass suicide in 1978. Loyalty and commitment are critical factors in cult formation.

According to Barker (1982) and Stark and Bainbridge (1985), people are driven to form religious sects and cults in an attempt to alleviate their feelings of *deprivation*. Several types of deprivation can promote the growth of cults:

- Deprivation can be economic, if income is inadequate and access to material goods is limited, or social, if people lack social status, power, prestige, and ability to join certain organizations or participate in certain activities.
- Deprivation can be psychological, if one feels dissatisfaction with or rejection by society, even though one shares its values and material rewards. This is similar to the Durkheimian theory of *anomie*. Durkheim (1893/1964) explained that anomie is a common occurrence when people's expectations about rewards and gratifications are not closely matched by what they actually receive. In a gold rush, for example, many people believe that they can be wealthy overnight. The norms that bind people to their conventional lives become weak, and as a result, some people abandon their families and job, travel long distances in search of riches and set up nontraditional communities (including joining or forming cults) that promote crime, violence, prostitution, and general disorder.
- Deprivation can be physical or mental if it is based on a particular handicap. To cope with this type of deprivation, people develop *innovative means* to pursue their goals. Robert K. Merton's theory of structural strain is an adaptation of Durkheim's anomie theory that emerged from the *functionalist* perspective of the structural sociology (Liska and Messner, 1999). Merton (1968) built on Durkheim's ideas and linked anomie to the achievement of goals and means. He said that for large numbers of people in modern society, worldly success – especially as it finds expression in material wealth – has become a cultural goal. However, only certain means – most commonly securing a good education and acquiring high – paying jobs – are the institutionalized and approved ways to achieve success. There might not be a problem if everybody had equal access to these institutionalized means for realizing monetary

success, but this is not the case. The weak, the poor and ethnic minorities often find themselves handicapped by group exclusion, little formal education or few economic resources. In such situation, such people may engage in forming or joining cults, steal, burglarize, rob, or extort to secure money and purchase the symbols of success.

Cults and Secret Societies in Nigeria

Cult (or its derivative, cultism) and secret societies are common features in traditional societies. Traditional societies do usually exhibit conflict- ridden interpersonal relations, and thus cults and secret societies provide means to satisfy the need for success and importance – and in some cases, passage to nobility. In certain parts of West Africa and Central Africa, the Ogboni and Owegbe fraternities, and the panethnic sodalities are *secret societies* made up exclusively of men and women. Like our college or university fraternities and sororities, these associations have secret initiation ceremonies. Amongst the Mende tribe of Sierra Leone, men's and women's secret societies provide passage to nobility and influence. The men's group, the *Poro* trains boys in civic duties and organize positive collectivities for its members. In Nupe and Tiv ethnic groups in Nigeria, sex antagonism in witchcraft cults is a reflection of male wish for superiority in societies where the female are economically successful (Uweru, 1988).

In traditional societies, there are no alternative ways of conceptualizing things since everyone shares the same world view. In such a system, there may be no words for expressing doubt about established beliefs or any possibility of imagining some other view of reality. In scientifically – oriented cultures, it is possible to separate ideas from reality; abstractions of almost infinite variety are possible. This situation gives the thinker an opportunity to test out a series of models until he finds one that fits his particular need. This encourages him to continue testing whenever the facts he observes do not seem to fit his theory – a classic case of scientific reasoning. Thus, in scientifically –oriented cultures, cults and secret societies have little or no meaning except when their activities border on *attitudinal discrimination* against certain ethnic minorities. For example, in the United States of America, members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) have expressed their prejudice against Blacks, Jews, and Catholics through verbal, physical and psychological harassment.

Secret Cults in Nigerian Universities and Colleges

In 1953, Wole Soyinka (now a professor) with seven other students of the University College, Ibadan formed the Pyrate Confraternity (PC). The idea of the founders of PC emerged from the impact of the *Eagle*, a campus magazine established to fight colonialism on campus and counter the influence of the *Bug*, a British Journal committed to the promotion of white superiority. In the 1950s, colonialism was becoming less fashionable in International politics fueling nationalism in colonized states. In Nigeria, it took the form of attacks on British colonial policies through news papers, petitions, riots, strikes and students' activism at the University College, Ibadan and overseas.

Today the Pyrate Confraternity has metamorphosed into the National Association of Seadogs registered under the Corporate Affairs Commission. It is the negative students' activism in the spirit of the Pyrate Confraternity that gave birth to the numerous secret groupings in Nigeria's tertiary institutions: Pyrates, Buccaneers, Black Axe, Marphytes, Jurist, Vykings, Eiye, Amazons, Daughters of Jezebel, Black Brassieres.

Research Problem

The literature on cults and secret societies has shown that they are formed to alleviate feelings of deprivations: economic, physiological, physical or mental. In conflict – ridden societies, they provide means to satisfy need for success and importance – and in some cases, passage to nobility. With the emergence of Fourth Republic in Nigeria in 1999, cultism has been elevated to criminal activities and political thuggery, fueling a cabal theory. The question is: Is there a link between cultism and the conduct of free and fair elections since 1999 – fuelling a cabal theory?

Research Methodology

The data for this study was drawn from three sources:

- (i) List of political office holders and their socio-political networking with cults and militant groups in the Niger-Delta 1999-2009.
- (ii) List of prominent retired military officers who have penetrated Nigeria's power aristocracy and members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party.
- (iii) NGOs Reports on 1999, 2003, 2007 Elections and April 25, 2009 re-run of the governorship election in Ekiti state of Nigeria.

The study involved interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with some members of Coalition of Democrats for Electoral Reform (CODER, Nigeria).

Results

Cultists have invaded the Nigeria political space, 1999-2009, thus elevating cultism to criminal activities, political thuggery and election rigging. As a result, the country, since 1999, has witnessed stifling political atmosphere fuelling a cabal theory. The ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has dominated the political space with the *ferocity of a bulldozer* to the exclusion of other political parties. Consequently, the people has been denied the opportunity to choose their leaders, distorting the doctrine of liberal or constitutional democracy.

Discussion: The Issue of Voter's Right

One distinctive hallmark of constitutional democracy and why it is preferred to other forms of government is periodic election. It offers a nation and its people opportunity to elect, re-elect or reject candidates who have offered themselves for public service. Thus, without a periodic election in a democracy, the state and its people are doomed, because there will be no room for national renewal, policies and more importantly, the emergence of individuals (leaders) that stir the ship of state. What this means is that the basic rubric of democracy is the people who should be accounted to on a periodic basis. The idea is connectivity between the people and their leaders – since genuine democracy is about transparency and accountability in government.

Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960 from the British Government without much historicity of struggle. This explains why at independence, the *Nigerian federation* was structurally and constitutionally designed in such a way that its Northern Region could always control the central government, with or without political support from the rest of the country. Apart from the vast landmass resulting from topography and the dominant population figure gratuitously allocated to it, the North was awarded the same number of seats in the central legislature as both the Eastern and Western Regions combined. From that point onwards, the prime political objective of the leaders of Northern Nigeria, who, ipso facto, became the *ordained rulers* of the country, was to maintain the constitutional and political privileges of the Nigerian independence settlement. Indeed, subsequent adjustments of this political construction through states creation

by military dictators, all of whom were of Northern extraction, were covert exercises in *gerrymandering* which accentuated the federation's existing lopsidedness, and enhanced the North's inherent advantages vis-à-vis the rest of the country. Thus, the emergent Nigerian political system in 1960 was a product of skewed power structure.

On May 29 1999, liberal democracy returned to Nigeria when civilians took over political authority at all tiers of government and the military returned to the barracks for the second time since independence. In 1999-2009 the Nigerian democracy was in ill-fitting garments: cultism and political thuggery dominated the political space, fueling a cabal theory. The cabal consisted of two amorphous power blocs: the first can be traced to the Northern Nigerian ruling aristocracy which became *modernized* and privileged by the vagaries of colonial rule and the transfer of power at Nigerian political independence in 1960, and the second consisted of prominent retired military officers, now political surrogates, who have penetrated Nigeria's power aristocracy. The cabal theory holds that the Nigerian power oligarchy wants to rule Nigeria in perpetuity. This implies the holding by Northerners, of the position of president, and of strategic institutions for security, economic resources, finance and the judiciary. To perpetuate themselves in power, the cabal employs various means - cultism, political thuggery, emasculation of the opposition at the point of political succession. This scenario perverted the democratic process where state organs and cultists were used to rig elections at all levels. This has been the position in the period under review. *The voter's right did not count.*

Against this background, Nigeria today faces a lot of challenges on many fronts: Niger – Delta rebellion, Islamic Boko Haram insurrection, mass poverty and alienation, state robbery and corruption, cultism and high – profile election rigging, institutionalized anarchy, industrial unrest, state delinquency, etc. All these problems- and many more – have led to the question: *is the Nigerian state a failed or delinquent state?*

Htt://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/politics/development defines a *failed state* as a state:

- (i) *That can no longer perform its basic security and development functions and that has no effective control over its territory and borders.*

(ii) *That can no longer reproduce the conditions for its own existence.*

Without going into the technical definition of a state, a state has three broad functions:

- (i) Coercive function which has to do with providing security to the social order and the ruling social classes and blocs for the status-quo to remain and be strengthened and by extension, the citizenry who serve the social order and the ruling classes and blocs.
- (ii) Ideological function which is the weapon (idea) used by the state to maintain and reproduce power. It takes the forms of ideas and institutions such as schools, religious doctrines and institutions, political parties and social movements, cultural and traditional institutions and practices, etc.
- (iii) Socio-economic functions which involves providing the general conditions of production and the maintenance of the economy. As the recent Economic Meltdown has shown, the ruling classes and blocs cannot privatize everything – roads, telecommunications, electricity, schools, industries, air transportations, etc, and still remain in power. The competition between the various fractions and individuals, and the extreme selfishness of most of them will tear the state apart or grind it to a halt. Thus, a superstructure (government) within the Keynesian thought must be put in place to coordinate the economy in the interest of the ruling classes and blocs as a whole.

A state that performs the above functions can be regarded as an *enduring state* - the opposite of a *failed state*. To further differentiate the two, <http://en.wikipedia.org/politics/development> provided three indicators of a failing state:

- (i) **Social indicators:** demographic pressures; massive movements of refugees and internally displaced peoples; legacy of vengeance – seeking groups; and chronic and sustained human flight.
- (ii) **Economic Indicators:** uneven economic development along group (ethnic) lines; and sharp/severe economic decline.
- (iii) **Political Indicators:** criminalization/delegitimisation of the state; progressive deterioration of public services; widespread violation of

human rights; security apparatus as state within a state; rise of fractionalized elite; and intervention of external states.

The indicators are elastic enough to cover all known state problems.

Employing these indicators, we return to our question: Is Nigeria a failed state? Given the earlier definition of a failed state, Nigeria is not yet a failed state though its citizens lack basic infrastructures: the average Nigerian carries on almost without government. He or she provides himself or herself with portable water, electricity, security, medicare, children's education, etc. However, there is a government in place dominated by a cabal-the ruling aristocracy. In this thesis, Nigeria may be regarded as a delinquent state where delinquency is measured by the degree to where the state *does not* satisfy the ordinary (basic) existential needs of the people. A delinquent state tends to a failed state when failure to carry out the three basic functions of an enduring state invites rebellions, insurrections, anarchy, 'states within a state', revolutions, etc. This is where Nigeria can be regarded as a *delinquent state*.

Summary

In the period, 1999-2009, the voter's right did not count. In the last ten years, our study has shown that elections – by implication democracy - are compromised with the help of cult and militant groups, and the state police. Elections in Nigeria, in the period under review, are nothing but state organized crime, fuelling a cabal theory: a power oligarchy that wants to rule Nigeria in perpetuity, promoting bad governance, corruption and poverty. In this scenario, many problems emerged: insecurity, ethnic- religious insurrections, institutionalized anarchy and industrial unrest. This is what has given rise to Nigeria being described as a delinquent state, governed by a cabal.

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