The Church and Community Leaders Role in Mitigating the Scourge of Cultism among Youths in Ughievwen Kingdom, Delta State.

By

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Abstract

This study delved into the role of the Church and Community leaders in mitigating the escalating prevalence of cultism among the youth in Ughievwen. The emergence of cultism was initially observed in Nigerian higher institutions in 1952 as a means of solidarity for those marginalized by the university administration. To achieve this aim, the phenomenological, descriptive and historical approaches were used. It was discovered that cultism, once confined to educational institutions, has now grown into a widespread scourge affecting society at large. The expansion of its membership has led to a pervasive presence across the entire country. Various cult groups with diverse agendas have emerged, their activities escalating into acts of violence and moral depravity. For instance, in urban areas, cultism has manifested in gang-related activities, drug trafficking, and even organized crime. This spread beyond educational boundaries has resulted in a significant challenge for law enforcement agencies, as these groups operate clandestinely, making it difficult to track and dismantle their operations. The transformation of cultism into a nationwide issue underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address this growing menace. Additionally, the infiltration of cultism into different sectors, such as politics and business, has further complicated the situation, requiring a multifaceted approach to combat its detrimental effects on society. The Ughievwen kingdom is experiencing a turbulent time due to heinous crimes such as

kidnapping, arm robbery, rape, and heavy fighting among two cult members.It concluded by noting that cultism especially in the Ughievwen kingdom has caused civil tension and unrest largely due to oppression, peer influence,quest for power and get-rich-quick syndrome.It is recommended the necessity of the church and community leaders to form a synergy to effectively control all groups within the community. They should devise strategies to address the current challenges encountered by the community and establish youth initiatives in collaboration with governmental entities to actively involve the younger generation. The church, through its establishments, should uphold its ethical doctrines without any concession..

Keywords: Cultism, Youth, Church, Community leaders, and Ughievwen kingdom

Introduction

Cultism poses a pressing challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the Ughievwen kingdom today. It entails a secretive ritual practice conducted by a clandestine group, with repercussions that extend to both members and non-members alike. (Ajayi et al, 2010). According to Erhuvwujefe (2012 p. 1), the earliest record of cultism in Nigeria was in 1952. Initially, this assembly harbored noble ideals and objectives upon its establishment, yet with the passage of time, it metamorphosed into a nefarious entity of egregious proportions. (Ezema, et al 2017 p. 254-255).

From in the 1990s, it spread to the nooks and crannies of Nigeria (Erhuvwujefe, 2012). One of the parts of Nigeria that is currently suffering from the menace of cultism among the youth is the Ughievwen kingdom, one of the 24 kingdoms of the Urhobo land of Delta State, Nigeria. With the series of campaigns against cultism in Nigeria, more youth are trooping into cultism in the Ughievwen kingdom due to peer influences, quest for power and protection, lack of parental care, non-prosecution of cult members, and the desire for revenge. This paper aims to look at the recent role of the church and the community leaders in curbing cultism in the Ughievwen kingdom.The research methods employed in this particular study encompass the descriptive and historical methodologies. To delve deeper, the descriptive method was utilized to meticulously outline the intricacies

of cultism within the Ughievwen kingdom. Despite extensive campaigns against cultism in Nigeria, there remains a concerning trend of youth gravitating towards such groups. For instance, the allure of power, protection, and a sense of belonging often entices vulnerable individuals into these clandestine organizations.

On the other hand, the historical approach sheds light on the evolution of cultism in the Ughievwen kingdom, tracing its origins and progression to the present day. By examining past activities, researchers were able to discern patterns and understood how these practices have permeated society over time. This method provided invaluable insights into the long-term impact of cultism on the general public, revealing a complex web of social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

Moreover, the oral interview method was instrumental in capturing first-hand accounts and perspectives on cultism among youths in the Ughievwen kingdom. Through personal communications with 12 individuals, the researchers gained a nuanced understanding of the underlying motivations, challenges, and consequences associated with involvement in such groups. These interviews offered a humanizing element to the study, giving voice to those directly affected by the phenomenon.

Cultism in Ughievwen Kingdom

Ughievwen Kingdom is one of the 24 kingdoms in Urhoboland. It is located in the Niger Delta region, in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria (Amrevurayire and Ojeh, 2016; Oghi, 2014). It has a large land mass and also a sizable youth population. According to Darah (2011 p. 285), the Ughievwen kingdom is made up of thirty-two communities with its headquarters at Otughievwen (Otujeremi). Before now, every community of the Ughievwen kingdom was known to be a peaceful place to stay until cultism crept in from higher institutions in the 1990s (Erhuvwujefe, 2012). Since then, the Ughievwen kingdom has experienced a turbulent time due to cult activities by youth in her communities. During the interview, it was gathered that the cult groups currently trending in Ughievwen's thirty-two communities are Aye, Eiye, Dominion, Arrow Baggers, and Vikings. All these cult groups have contributed to insecurity in the kingdom. Between 2016-2024, there were a series of cult clashes in different communities of the kingdom

which led to the destruction of lives and properties. Kidnapping, rape, fighting, arm robbery, and other social vices common among cult members are becoming rampant in the kingdom. Residents of these communities sleep with their eyes opened. On a daily basis, the majority of innocent youth witnessed oppression, bullying, and intimidation from fellow *Ighene* (Age-Grade) who is a cult member. Worst is the fact that most vigilantes who are the warlords and community guards who defend the community against intruders according to Atake (2019) are members of different cult groups who end up protecting and defending their colleagues in all the kingdom.

Motivation for Cultism among Ughievwen Youths

The following are some of the causes of the growing spate of cultism among youth in Ughievwen kingdom:

1. Peer influence One of the primary reasons why more youth are joining cult groups in Ughievwen kingdom is peer influence, a phenomenon that is common to most societies with a large population of youths (Omosor and Kowhiroro, 2021). Peer influence is inevitable as they tend to copy from one another (Uroko, 2021). Indeed, it is an agent of socialization which serves as a vector for spreading cultism, the other side of socialization (Chukwurah, et al., 2022). According to Uviekovo and Idjakpo (2023), there are a myriad of persons including teenagers to readily copy from their peers. Thus, many have been swept off their feet thereby streaming along the path of cultism which they sometimes refer to as 'belong' ability to mingle or socialize at every cost. However, others joined the cult out of threat according to Miwari and Tariah (2023). Such persons are possibly threatened, lured and or were coerced to join.

2. **Quest for power and protection.** Some young persons engage in cultism in the kingdom primarily because of power and protection. Deedam (2019) notes highlight individuals drawn to cults due to insecurity, seeking protection and status. Young men in the Ughievwen kingdom join cults for acknowledgment and empowerment. Disadvantaged or excluded individuals find belonging in cults. Desire for recognition and power drives individuals towards cults for identity and importance. Cults offer control and authority to those feeling powerless. Addressing insecurity and lack of support can prevent individuals from joining

cults. Providing alternative validation and empowerment can steer individuals towards fulfilling life choices. According to Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015), this set of people thinks being a cultist would make their goal attainable. However, they have chosen a part of self-destruction.

3. **For money and material possession**

In the kingdom of Ughievwen, a concerning trend has emerged among the youth. It has become apparent that many young individuals are drawn to joining cults due to the perceived financial stability of well-known cult members. This desire to attain a lavish lifestyle similar to that of established cult figures has led to a significant increase in cult memberships among the youth. Deedam (2019) highlights that for these individuals, cultism serves as a short-cut to acquiring wealth and material possessions rapidly. This is because involvement in cult activities exposes them to criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and illegal oil refining.

Moreover, it is widely believed that certain unscrupulous politicians exploit these vulnerable youth by using them as thugs for their own political gains, particularly during elections (Ube and Idiege, 2014). This manipulation further fuels the influx of youths into cultism in the kingdom, as they are enticed by the promises and rewards offered by corrupt politicians. The allure of quick money and the influence of powerful individuals have created a dangerous environment where impressionable young people are easily swayed towards engaging in criminal behaviour.

As a result, youths in Ughievwen are increasingly turning to cultism as a means to achieve financial prosperity and gain favour with influential figures. The cycle of exploitation perpetuated by corrupt politicians and the allure of a luxurious lifestyle continue to drive the youth towards the treacherous path of cult involvement. It is imperative for the community and authorities to address these underlying issues and provide alternative pathways for the youth to pursue legitimate opportunities for growth and success. Only through concerted efforts to combat the root causes of cultism can the kingdom hope to steer its young population away from the dangers and pitfalls of criminal activities.

4. **Non-Prosecution Of a Cult Member**

In the Ughievwen kingdom, more youth are trooping into cultism. Mezie-Okoye (2010) noted that since no one has been prosecuted, caution has been thrown to the wind. He was complemented by Chukwurah et al, (2022) adding that lack of legal consequences for individuals involved in cult activities within our society has served as a catalyst for drawing numerous young individuals towards such nefarious groups. The interview highlighted a growing trend where some of the current community leaders within the Ughievwen kingdom, unknowingly appointed by the council of elders to oversee community matters, are renown cultists. These leaders often shield their fellow members under the oath of secrecy and membership, without recourse to the perpetrated crime committed within the community.

5. Lack of parental care

Cultism as one of the criminal acts among the youths in Urhoboland, it is a result of poor parenting and school environment (Omosor and Kowhiroro, 2023). Adewale (2005) observed the waning value of family influence which has eroded greatly resulting in loss of control, thus the average family has failed in its function to provide a solid moral foundation for children. Surely, a youth who lacks proper religious and moral instruction is most vulnerable , he/she can easily fall victim of cultism especially, if the perceived gap (s) is filled the gaps: lack of care, provision, security and love which germane to parental roles in ensuring security of their children (Ube and Idiege, 2014 and Njoku, 2017). In some cases, such victims are naive, not knowing the details and dangers involved being a cultist. Otakpo et al. (2020) saw hardship and frustration among the youth as another factor that can be fingered as motivation to cultism. Hence, some resort to it as the apian way to achieve their aims with ease or without struggle, this exactly, is the case in Ughievwen towns and villages.

6. Desire for revenge

According to Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015), the thirst for vengeance is a motivating factor behind the enrollment of certain college students in cult organizations. This sentiment is echoed by the majority of individuals interviewed, who posit that the pursuit of retribution plays a significant role in the increasing membership of young men in various cult factions within the towns

and villages of Ughievwen. They perceive cult affiliation as a means to exact revenge or retribution for the wrongs committed against them by members of rival cult groups. Additionally, they view cult membership as a means to liberate themselves from the shackles of oppression and intimidation imposed by their peers who are entrenched in cult activities.

Effects of Cultism in the Ughievwen Kingdom

Cultism has caused untold harm in Nigerian society in particular in Ughievwen kingdom and the effects are not far-fetched. The Ughievwen kingdom is gradually becoming an unsafe kingdom in Urhoboland as youth who are cultists are making it unbearable for others to stay. Heinous crimes like armed robbery, rape, kidnapping, and pipeline vandalism common among cult members according to Miwari and Tariah (2023) are becoming paramount in the kingdom. Currently, some communities of the kingdom are experiencing high levels of insecurity due to everyday kidnapping for ransom.

Destruction of public and private properties is mostly a result of violence from cult members. Properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed in communities in Niger Delta where cult violence is widespread in recent times (Ajayi et al, 2010). Ughievwen kingdom is part and parcel of communities affected by cult violence in this part of Nigeria. According to Molagun (2006) from his work on cultism, he avers that one of the effects of cultism is that it dents the image of our noble nation. This is the case with most communities in the Ughievwen kingdom. Due to constant cult violence among the youth, the image of most communities is deteriorating and it is affecting the development of these communities. In these communities, every young man is seen and perceived as a cult member due to the high level of cultism among the youth.

Cultism has also contributed to the increase in the death rate among young ones in Nigerian society (Olayinka, 2020). On several occasions, there were a series of cult clashes among different cult groups which created tension in the Ughievwen kingdom. During this period, some persons lost their lives prematurely and some retail shops were looted in the process. Worse is the fact that some innocent ones lose their lives as a result of their relationship with a wanted cult member by another cult group.

Another effect of cultism is that the cultist loses his independence to a group of dis-oriented persons (Nsor, 2016 p. 48). Many young men in the Ughievwen kingdom have lost control over their lives. Their conduct and actions are determined by these dis-oriented persons and those willing to quit cultism cannot do so due to their fear of being murdered.

The Role of the Church

Like some other tribes in Nigeria, the Ughievwen kingdom is a kingdom with many churches that have obligations to the kingdom (see Iheaka et al, 2023). One of such obligations of the churches in the Ughievwen kingdom is the fight against cultism within and outside the kingdom. The term church is used here is used in the generic term to include all who profess faith in Christ, to mean people of God. They came together and established the Ughievwen Christian Association (UCA), an umbrella body to project a common front, to pray against insecurity, vices, cultism, and impoverishment imposed by internal factors in Ughievwen kingdom.

During the interview, it was also noted that the church organizes programs and seminars for the youth where they are not only trained to be cautious of their actions but also to avoid the menace of cultism in the kingdom. The interviewees also agreed that Pentecostal churches like the Africa Church, Christ Apostolic Church, and Mountain of Fire ministries organize free skill acquisition for the youth across all their branches in the kingdom. This free training aims to save the youth from the burden of depression and idleness which may lead to cultism. All the churches also have counselling units in all their branches across the kingdom to deal with matters concerning poor parenting, cultism among the youth, and other challenges that may cause unrest in society. The day and time at which the church organizes its counselling unit varies from one church to another.

The Role of the Community Leaders

Before cultism in the Ughievwen kingdom, all the community leaders had a way of dealing with insecurity and other challenges in the kingdom. These community leaders were also known as traditional rulers. The traditional rulers are known as chiefs or kings of independent communities (Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu, 2021). According to Okonkwo et al (2019), they are agents of conflict resolution in their

various communities. Due to the high level of insecurity emanating from the menace of cultism in the Ughievwen kingdom, the community leaders of the thirty-two communities of the kingdom have joined the church in the fight against cultism in the kingdom. However, their methods of approach vary from community to community. During the interview, it was noted that in some communities of the Ughievwen kingdom, the community leaders appointed some persons (apart from the vigilante group) who look into cult matters, and if anyone especially the youth is found guilty of cultism, such youth is given a hundred strokes and warned severely to desist from cultism.

A thirty-two-year-old interviewee avers that in some other places of the kingdom, with the help of the community leaders, cult members are arrested by the Nigerian police and prosecuted according to the law. There is also a consensus among interviewees that in some villages, there is a local law put in place by the community leaders to punish the family of any youth caught in cult activities. This law is to help parents watch the conduct of their children in society. In most cases, the community leaders would fine such parents two hundred thousand naira, and failure to pay this money may lead to their indefinite suspension from the affairs of the community such as a leadership position. It was also noted during the interview that with the help of the community leaders, some communities of the kingdom have joined the church in creating free skill acquisition training in their various community town halls for the youth. This was also to discourage them from idleness.

Recommendations

1. The church and community leaders are crucial in battling Cultism in the kingdom. They must continue efforts to eradicate this influence by engaging with youth and providing alternative opportunities for growth. Implementing educational programs raises awareness about cultism dangers and empowers individuals to resist peer pressure. Collaboration with law enforcement can address cult hotspots. Remaining committed to eradicating cultism through vigilance, education, and collaboration is crucial. Together, they can make a significant impact in the fight against cultism and create a safer community.

2. Leaders in the community should avoid cultism and social vices as it can divide the community. Cult activities can lead to neglect of responsibilities, hindering progress. Upholding moral values is essential for effective leadership. Responsible leaders set a positive example for the community. Prioritizing the common good ensures a better future for all.

3. The church spreads messages of hope, faith, and salvation. It must stay committed to doing good and spreading the gospel. Emphasizing salvation messages reminds followers of core principles. Teaching about repentance and forgiveness leads to spiritual growth. Transitioning to salvation messages creates a balanced approach. True prosperity comes from a rich spiritual life. Prioritize teaching salvation messages for spiritual well-being. The church's mission is to spread the gospel of salvation.

4. Every young person in Ughievwen land should be cautious of evil practitioners as well as resist the pressure from their peers, they should be guided by their church's teaching and the laws of the land.

5. Youth in Ughievwen land should resist evil despite challenges, as life offers hope. Young people should uphold moral values and set positive examples in their community. Instead of crime, focus on education, sports, or community service for a better society. Obstacles offer growth opportunities. Stay positive, seek support, and be resilient. "Where there is life, there is hope" - a brighter future awaits by staying true to values.

6. Parents in Ughievwen land should live right with God, they should provide exemplary leadership and godly influence and virtues.

Conclusion

Cultism is a serious problem in Nigerian society in particular in the Ughievwen kingdom where heinous crimes such as kidnapping, armed robbery, fighting, and destruction of properties common among cultists are rampant. These crimes have created tension and unrest in the kingdom. With these effects, there is a growing spate of cultism among the youth due to a series of oppression and intimidation from cult members in the kingdom. Other factors are peer influences, the quest for

money, and materialism. However, the churches in the Ughievwen kingdom and the community leaders of the kingdom are not silent on the issue of cultism in the land. The churches are making every possible effort through their programs and seminars to stop the young ones especially the youth from joining the cult. The community leaders have instituted different approaches that will help eradicate cultism from the kingdom.

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