Cultism and the Rise of Militancy in Etche: Its Implications for African Traditional Religion.

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the examination of cultism and the rise of military in Etche and its implications for African Traditional Religion. The paper contends that the menace of cultism and militancy will not only impinge very negatively on African indigenous beliefs and practices but will also erode important African cultural values and ethos relating to the human person. The study adopts historical and phenomenological approaches. Historical approach enabled the researcher to trace the emergence and development of cultism and militancy in Etche. With the phenomenological approach the researcher was able to analyze, interpret and describe the data as they unfold without forcing in and forcing out meanings into them. Findings from the study reveal that youth's restiveness is due to unemployment. This is the outstanding factor behind this sudden plague. Therefore, the paper recommends that the Rivers State government should create job opportunities for the youths to reduce youth's restiveness.

Keywords: Cultism, Militancy, Etche, Implications, African Traditional Religion

Introduction.

Etche, on which this paper focuses, is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State. It is located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Aba in Abia State in the East (Nwiyi, G.U. 2012:68). According to Etche socio-political organization, there are five outstanding clans that make up Etche ethnic nationality. The clans are, Mba, Okehi, Ozuzu, Igbo and Ulakwo Umuselem.

As for their economic life, the people of Etche are predominantly farmers. They engage in production of palm oil, cocoyam, etc but the most important are yam and cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people located within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, they experience the normal Niger Delta climatic condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season takes place between March and November. The dry season occurs between November and February (Emma A. 2000:1).

With regards to their religious life, there is a strong believe in the existence of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Etche, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly rather He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities and other spirit beings.

Statement of the Problem

Etche is well endowed with natural resources and one of the oil producing communities in Rivers State. There are multitudes of industry in Etche. Also, it is the food basket of Rivers State. Despite this, unemployment rate

is high and alarming in Etche. Every year, hordes of youth graduate from secondary and tertiary institutions with no prospects of employment. After years of walking the streets in search of non-existent jobs, they are ready to go anywhere to do anything just as long as they can be gainfully employed. The negative impact of unemployment has led many Etche youths into different kinds of crimes and criminality.

Aim of the Study

The aims of this study are:

To examine the havoc emanating from the activities of cultism and militancy in Etche and to examine how this has impinge negatively on African indigenous beliefs and practices especially on the dead.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected from two major sources. Oral sources and secondary sources. Oral sources (interviews with indigenous Etche across gender). Secondary sources (published and unpublished materials). The study adopts historical and phenomenological approaches. Historical approach enabled the researcher to trace the emergence and development of cultism and militancy in Etche. With the phenomenological approach the researcher was able to analyze, interpret and describe the data as they unfold without forcing in and forcing out meanings into them.

Cultism and Militancy: An Overview

Cultism or secret cults, according to Williams Wodi (2006:6), are organizations, associations, groups or body of persons whose membership, meetings and other activities are kept secret, and which promote a cause or engage in acts of violence, intimidation or harm, in whatever manner, against the public or any member of the public. In much the same vein, for Ogbu, Kalu and Iffih, B.N (2001:38) secret cults are any association, group

or body of persons whether registered or not that use secret signs, oaths, rites and symbols and which is formed to promote a cause, the purpose and interest of its members, and to aid one another under circumstances without due regard to merit, fair-play or justice to the detriment of legitimate interest of those who are non-members.

In the words of Friday, J. (2010:346) secret cult is an organization whose activities are kept away from the knowledge of others or a group of people whose activities are carried out in exclusive locations and unusual times without being exposed to the uninitiated. For him, these activities are essentially covert, disguised and are usually carried out behind closed doors.

According to Joseph, O (2010:364) the emergence of cultism in the Nigerian polity is traced to the traditional African societies mainly in the early 1960s and 70s where some secret societies such as owegbe, poro, ekpe, etc had strongly featured. Thus, as Anyacho, E.O (1994:174) states these traditional secret societies did not register much fear in the minds of the people the way secret cults register today. According to Anyacho, some of them were even used as agents of government during the pre-colonial times. Explaining further, Awolalu, J.O. and Dopamu, P.A. (1979:220) add that:

> Originally, these secret societies were instituted for the purpose of self-preservation and for the preservation of the community. They enforced and maintained traditional customs and beliefs. They determined ritual behaviours and regulate social attitudes. In this way, they became the "power" of the community where they featured.

On the contrary, Ogba Johnson (2009:88) argues that since their activities are often in secret, one cannot be sure that they are working for good of the society. For him, this is so, since their activities are not defined and verified. Similarly, as Tasie, G.I.K (2014:180) notes though these secret societies, in

traditional Africa, is useful in the maintenance of peace, traditional norms, customs and the promotion of harmonious living; the activities of some of them are detestable. Any wonder, Okodudu, S.A. and Godspower Irikana (2005:44) attributed the proliferations and multiplications of various secret cults in Nigerian society and the institution of higher learning to the traditional African secret societies to which their negative impact have caused untold distractions and serious mayhem in the Nigerian polity. The above submission is substantiated by Friday, 1, (2001:347) when he notes:

> Cultism has its root in traditional secret organizations in the society such as the Ogboni, Awopa, Okija, etc where cult groups on campuses have taken a cue from whose members are highly placed individuals that are occupying positions in society.

In addition to this, is the atrocities emanating from the ugly menace of cultism. In Nigerian society today, even in the institutions of higher learning some of these nefarious activities are rampant (Kalu and Iffih, 1990:28).Their multifarious include, assassination, robbery, rape, abduction, killing, maiming, drug trafficking, money laundering, etc. As they further stated, these cultists often times perpetrate these dastardly acts with impunity and without regards to the sanctity of life. Following this, is the recruitment and initiation of members into the secret cults. Recruitment and initiation of members into the secret cults seems to be the most significant and inevitable because any cultist regardless of age and status must undergo this ritual exercise. Preceding the initiation rites is the recruitment of newly admitted members. This assumes and takes the form of physical torture and screening.

The essence of this is not only to test the willingness and the ability of aspirants before being initiated, but also to ascertain whether aspirants will exhibit signs of cowardice. Notable among this include, severe beating, flogging, ability to consume alcohol, smoke Indian hemp, to use weapons,

etc. next is the initiation rite. The first step in the initiation process in swearing an oath of allegiance and secrecy. Following closely to this is drinking of some concoctions mixed with blood of the new entrants. Significantly, it shows not only concrete manifestation of commitment to cultism, but also an indication of state of no retreat. That is why renunciation of membership from cultism has always been disastrous sometimes resulting into loss of lives and perpetual unrest of cultists. (Friday, 2001: 357).

As for militancy, it is the act of picking up arms illegally against constituted authority either for selfish reasons or emancipation purposes within a definite sovereign nation (Gyles, D. 2003:51). When a mention is made of militancy what readily come to mind is that of the Niger Delta experience; a geo-political zone that make up the following states: Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, with fringes in parts of Abia, Cross River, Edo, Imo and Ondo states (Afanotan and Ojakorotu, 2009:36). Although, militancy in Nigeria according to them, is not only limited to the Niger Delta region alone but there are resemblances of such cases like Boko-Haram insurgency in the north and the Odual People's Congress (OPC) in the west.

Militancy in the Niger Delta started with the inception of the Ogoni uprising of the late 1980s; and culminated in the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the "Ogoni 9"(Nine Ogoni Leaders) on Novemver 10, 1995 by the General Sani Abacha dictatorship to the Kaiama declaration by the Ijaws in 1998. Kaiama declaration iner-alia: demanded the immediate withdrawal of all military forces from Ijaw land, the right to ownership and control of resources, etc. The above dates in line with the above mentioned incident marked the birth of militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that later ignited off different militant groups such as Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (Mend), Niger Delta Vigilantee Force (NDVF), etc. some notable leaders of

these militant groups include, Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom, Saboma Jackrich, Tompolo, Henry Okah, etc (Isiki Rose Adadaddy, 2008:32).

As for the reasons for the emergence of militancy, as Ogbo Sunday Osalaa, (2014:18) states "many factors are responsible for the emergence of militancy". The reasons among others include: the need to secure resources control from the Nigerian State, the need for emancipation from long years of marginalization, oppression, underdevelopment, and militarization of the Niger Delta by the Nigerian State, the need to protect the destruction of the land with its attendant socio-economic depletion, environmental degradation caused by oil exploration activities, etc. The people felt that they have been marginalized and thus suffered long years of neglect without been adequately taken care of by the Nigerian State and the oil multinationals operating in the area despite the fact that the oil which is the economic mainstay of the nation is being sourced from the Niger Delta region. Here, militancy became the only option after long years of dialogue to address the above scenario.

As Ogbuku Samuel (2012:72) notes "with the institutionalization of violence such as:

> Kidnapping, hostage – taking, pipeline vandalism, crude oil theft and refining, oil bunkering, harassment of security forces, disruption of operation of oil companies, even general insecurity and dislocation of socio-economic activities in the region, leading to reduction in government earning, etc under various militant groups in the region, the Nigerian State had no option but to introduce the Amnesty programme on June 25, 2009 under President Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar 'Adua's led administration.

According to Ogbuku, the aim of the Amnesty was basically to restore the protracted insecurity in the region and restore normalcy, security, peace for socio-economic development of the nation's petroleum

sector that was almost grounded to a halt. As for the emergence of cultism in Etche, cultism in Etche dates back to the early 1990s with the formation of *D-well* and *D-gbam* by some secondary school boys from Etche who were then living in the Diobu area of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, though it existed at a micro-level. Studies in this regard show that not much about their negative influences were felt or heard since people could go about their daily business without any form of harassment, intimidation, molestation. There were no reported cases of killing or robbery. Although, these secrets cults were short lived due to the gruesome murder of their leaders in a cult clash with rival groups (Njoku, D. 5/09/2015, oral interview).

Later in 2011, another brutal secret cult group emerged; this time with the name *umuoma* (i.e. children with unquestionable and reputable characters). The name *umuoma*, as earlier pointed out, is synonymous with where a bad man claims to be a saint. The coming into being of *umuoma* in Etche is a direct opposite of *D-well* and *D-gbam*. It is the last straw that broke the camel's back as we shall later find out in the course of this essay.

With regards to militancy, militancy started in Etche in 2015. In fact, militancy in Etche is regarded as a by-product of cultism in the sense that cultism is the basic foundation which give rise to different militant groups in Etche. Investigation shows that without the introduction of cultism there wouldn't have being anything like militancy in Etche (Oluo, F. 19/09/2015, oral interview).

Thus, in Etche cultism is the senior brother of militancy because for one to be a militant it is rest assured that the fellow must first of all be initiated into the secret cult. This explains why there is no clear cut distinction between who is a cultist and who is a militant in Etche because the same person who is into cultism is the same into militancy. The atrocities they perpetrate are synonymous in nature. The rise of cultism and

military in Etche as studies have shown can be attributed to greed, youth's restiveness, and lust for material wealth, the desire to be feared, known and respected in the society. These people who have turned themselves into groups of mauradous and turned Etche into a state of terrorism and cannibalism are true sons of Etche drawn from the various clans that make up Etche ethnic nationality. Of all the atrocities emanating from the activities of cultism and militancy in Etche, the most devastating and mind boggling is that aspect that concerns the killing, maiming and burning of people. This act of wickedness in Etche has become a recurrent decimal such that one begins to wonder whether the regard to the sanctity of life has being relegated to the background. People are being killed, maimed and burned in places such as at the market places, in the school premises, on the road, even in their houses, etc. One begins to pause and ponder when the killing and burning of human beings in Etche have suddenly become synonymous with the killing and butchering of wild and domestic animals (Igbokwe, J. 20/09/2015, oral interview).

Apart from this, kidnapping is another havoc that gives concern for worry. In Etche, everybody is a target and nobody is exempted, even the unborn child in the womb of a pregnant mother. Kidnapping, like the killing and burning of people has become a daily operation. They operated with sophisticated weapons such as Ak 47, Automatic rifle, Pomp action, dane gun and cutlass, with a stand by motor cycle, or motor car to abscond with the victim. At times, most of the unfortunate victims of these acts in the process lose their lives in the only God's knows where dumping camps either as a result of old age resulting from the unfair-torture or inability of one's relations to pay for the demanded ramsome within the time frame. Nowadays, people are being kidnapped for a degrading ramsome sum of Five hundred naira, One thousand naira, etc. Sometimes, the corpses of such people cannot never be traced or found (Nwankwo, E. 10/10/2015 oral interview). According to oral testimonies, sometimes they kidnapped without the intention of demanding for a ramsome but to use the victims

for rituals and sacrifices mainly to energize the source that offers them protection. For instance, on May 25, 2015 a certain woman by name Grace Nweke was kidnapped, she was eight months pregnant. In the camp where they took her to she was stripped naked and was operated alive and removed of the unborn baby in her womb. In the process of the surgery she gave up the ghost and her corpse was burned to ashes thereafter while the baby was pounded in mortar, wrapped in a black nylon and was sent to their spiritual grand master who prepares them a charm called *odeshi* (that is, it will never penetrate). *Odeshi* is a charm that serves as spiritual breastplate for these vermin's. That is why the bullets hardly enter into them. Another negative impact of cultism and military in Etche is rape. According to investigations, raping of girls in Etche has become the order of the day. Victims of this unfortunate mayhem sometimes are kidnapped and raped while on their return from school. Some are also ambushed and raped while on their way to the farm or on their way back from the farm. Most disturbing is that after raping these girls they will burn their dresses, bras and undies and order them to run away completely nude (Ofoji, N. 21/10/2015 oral interview). They are agents of destruction in that they are used as armed thugs and hijackers of electoral materials such as ballot boxes, ballot papers, stamp pad, etc during the election. In such situation shooting of guns sporadically and undeserved beating of the electoral officials complete the rest exercise. In addition to this, are stealing, broad day robbery, looting and arson, harassment, intimidation, molestation, etc and other despicable acts and many more are unleashed on innocent members of society.

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The havoc emanating from the activities of cultism and militancy in Etche, more importantly the aspects that borders on burning and maiming is not only completely strange, but also not in line with indigenous African beliefs especially when it concerns the dead and how it should be treated and

disposed of. One important aspect of African burial rites is the dignity accorded to the corpse. Among many African people, prior to its final disposal, the corpse is thoroughly washed with sponge and soap, the washing is carried out methodically by persons approved by tradition. It is significant and carried out with utmost seriousness (Tasie, G.I.K and Amadi Emanuel Echezolochi. 2013:25). Similarly, among the Yoruba, it is reported that great importance is attached to the washing of the corpse because it is believed that one has to be clean in order to be admitted into the abode of the ancestors (Tasie and Amadi cited in Awolalu and Dopumu, 1979:259).

For the Isiokpo, of the Niger Delta, the corpse is washed thoroughly with soap and stream water, using a wrapper, preferably george as sponge. The mouth is opened and thoroughly washed, as also are the torso, limbs and armpits, so that the deceased may reincarnate without body odour. The pudenda, too, must be washed thoroughly so that the deceased may not reincarnate with virginal odour. Equally important is the requirement that water be allowed to drain out of the ear so that the deceased may not have ear discharge in his next incarnation (Tasie, G.I.K, 2013:11).

After the bath, Africans take special care in attiring the corpse most often the deceased is attired in its finest clothes, often reflecting his social status and professional affiliation. Kings and nobles are dressed in royal attires, priests and cultic functionaries are dressed in their cultic accoutrements and hunters are attired in their hunting garb. An accomplished person is further bedecked with jewelries and expensive wrappers. So, dressed, the corpse is brought into the chamber and laid in a beautifully decorated platform for its final public viewing. (Tasie 2013:11). This elaborate preparation of the corpse for its final public appearance has direct relationship and relevance to important African cultural values such that it not only tell the crowd of sympathizers the caliber of the person whom death had snatched away, but it is also a reminder to the mourners that the deceased left behind children-sons and daughters well endowed

materially to mourn their parents. Most importantly, it is of essence that the deceased be dressed to reflect his status because it is believed that he carries some token of his position live in the material world to the world in the hereafter. Such is the dignity and grandeur accorded the corpse. For African traditionalists, to burn the corps indiscriminately or criminally is the most despicable act of disregard melted out to the deceased. Burning of corpses, generally, in the context of African traditional religion, connotes punishment and humiliation (Tasie and Amadi 2013:86). Most often, it is the corps of evil people especially sorcerers, witches and *Ogbanje* (born to die children) that are treated this way. While it is a mark of punishment to burn the corpses of sorcerers and witches as pay back for their evil acts the corpse of an *Ogbanje* (born to die children) is burnt with the aim of causing it pain and lowering its ego in order to prevent it from reincarnating back into the homestead.

One can deduce from the above that in indigenous Africa burning of corpse is associated with evil death, aimed at humiliating and inflicting pain on the deceased; whereas interment of corpse is a symbol of good death aimed at dignifying the deceased (Tasie, G.I.K, 2013:19). In addition to this, is the interment of corpse. For African people interment of corpse is an important religious ceremony. Beginning from choosing the spot where the grave will be dug, selection of grave diggers, the time of actual interment to the positioning of the corpse in the grave, whether the deceased should be faced north or south, east or west, are considered very important in ensuring the salvation of the soul and to safeguard the deceased in its arduous journey to the spirit land.

For African people, therefore, the grave is highly revered for it does not only serve as the final resting place of the deceased, but as the womb in which the deceased is conceived to be reborn into the hereafter (Tasie and Amadi, 2013:86). But the most remarkable use to which Africans put the grave, especially of the recent dead is that "it becomes a new shrine for the

living dead" (Tasie and Amadi in J.S. Mbiti, 1969:134). In this regard, the grave here becomes a veritable spot to locate the deceased and near kin frequent it, not only as a symbol of re-enacting the bond of family ties but to communicate their heart desires to the deceased. The looming question here is of what implication does burning of corpses as the aftermath of cultism and militancy have on the attachment of living to the graves of their cherished relatives?

Such act will completely erase the grave which hitherto is considered by African traditionalist as a shrine for the dead as earlier noted. For in the absence of the grave, it will be practically impossible for the living to commune and communicate with their dead ones and relatives. For a burnt body is completely consumed by fire, its remains, the ashes, scattered and thrown away therefore, the deceased is completely wiped out since there is no grave standing as a remembrance, the deceased is easily forgotten like those of evil dead, whose corpses are cast away into the evil forest to rot. This is the worst form of alienation and estrangement and African people will do everything possible to detest it. (Tasie and Amadi, 2013:87).

Following closely to this, is life in the after-life. For many African people, life in the after-life is patterned and modeled similarly as life in the visible tangible world. The dead, even though spirits are believed to possess physical human attributes, retaining their material bodies even when they appear in dreams or sometimes in real life, they assume their material bodies, and are recognized, howbeit, fearfully by their Kith and Kin. More so, the socio-political organization of the mundane world is not only a replica of the hereafter, but also there are office holders such as family and lineage heads, elders and chiefs, operating as they did while here on earth. Similarly, socio-cultural activities like wrestling and new yam festivals are celebrated in the hereafter and almost the same time here (Tasie and Amadi, 2013).

The overall picture of the hereafter, therefore, is one that construed as similarly in many respects as life in the visible tangible world, where the dead move about and conduct their affairs with their material bodies unimpaired. Based on this, all over traditional Africa, people take extra-care to elaborately prepare the corpse so that it appears natural, healthy for its last public appearance. Therefore, its implication here is that a burnt corpse is a representation of picture of a completely destroyed individual who has become ashes and ceased to exist. Therefore, this picture of a burnt corpse is not anyway in line with traditional African beliefs as regards the dead and how it should live in the hereafter. In traditional Africa, for the dead to live in an after-life recreated purely as life in the visible tangible world, it must be intact with its material body unimpaired.

One other ugly impact cultism and militancy in Etche will have on African indigenous religion borders on the belief in reincarnation. Reincarnation is an important element of traditional African belief used especially to assert life and deny death, and to explain what happens to the dead in the hereafter. Thus, in African religious thought, death is not the termination of life but rather a transition from the physical to the world beyond; and a continuation of life thereafter, where the individual continues to live in some form and from where he is reborn into the physical world. In African religious world view, a good reincarnation is not only one in which a departed and cherished member of the family is reborn, but also such a person must have been free from disabilities. In the context of African traditional belief, disabilities could arise largely from the manner the corps was treated and disposed of. This explains why Africans take special care in handling the corpse until its final interment.

Among some cultures, even when the corpse has been lowered into the grave, before it is covered with earth, to ensure that it reincarnates whole without deformity, a relation of the deceased is called upon to go down into the grave and adjust the head of the deceased. This is very

important because should he not straighten the head, the deceased may reincarnate deformed (Tasie and Amadi, 2013). Yet, in the context of African traditional belief, for the deceased to reincarnate whole, with its material body and physical structure complete, the corpse must be intact, complete and not damage at the time of interment. As for an amputee, there is no doubt, he may reincarnate without a limb. Same holds true of the corpse who has been completely consumed by fire, and become mere ashes.

Recommendations

1. The Rivers State government should create job opportunities for the youths to reduce youth's restiveness.
2. There should be industrial training centers for the youths to acquire skills.

Conclusion

The havoc emanating from the activities of cultism and militancy in Etche is not only mindboggling but a hydra headed monster that has refused to go despite every effort to proscribe it. From our discussion in the preceding section, it is obvious that the inhuman acts of maiming and burning of people into ashes not only impinge very negatively on African indigenous beliefs but also erodes important African cultural values and ethos relating to the human person. Unequivocally, it debases the deceased and reduces the corpse not only to a mere object but also to a log of wood. To curb this unabated menace to the barest minimum, the Rivers State government should do everything within her power to make sure that the restive cultists and the militants are engaged since unemployment has been acknowledged as one of the outstanding factor responsible for this unprecedented onslaught.

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