

The Ancestry of Cultism in Nigerian Universities and Its Implications for National Development.

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Abstract- *This paper examines the evolution and impact of cultism in Nigerian universities, tracing its origin from the Pyrates Confraternity (1952), founded on intellectual and anti-elitist ideals, to its current form as clandestine, violent groups. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Strain Theory, the study explores the structural and political pressures that transformed early confraternities into security threats. Findings highlight key factors sustaining cultism, including institutional failures, economic strain, and political exploitation, showing how these groups undermine human capital, disrupt education, and exacerbate social insecurity. The paper concludes with recommendations for intervention, emphasizing campus security, psychosocial support, multi-stakeholder engagement, and legal accountability. Understanding the ancestry and drivers of cultism is crucial for restoring Nigerian higher education integrity and supporting national development.*

Index Terms- *Cultism, Nigerian Universities, Student Confraternities, National Development, Campus Violence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultism in Nigerian universities originated in the mid-twentieth century as student confraternities formed around intellectual ideals and social reform but subsequently transformed into networks associated with intimidation and violence (Ikelegbe, 2006; Ugwuoke, 2010).

The first of these organizations, the Pyrates Confraternity (now Ugwuoke, 2010), emerged at University College Ibadan in 1952 as a National Association of Seadogs.

response to elitism and social exclusion on campus, articulating an early agenda of intellectual brotherhood and anti-elit activism (Adewuyi, 2019).

Over the following decades, structural pressures within universities, political interference, notably during the periods of military era, and changing social incentives contributed to the erosion of these

founding ideals and the progressive criminal activities of some confraternities (Aghedo & Eke, 2019).

The issue is significant because universities are central to human capital formation, civic leadership, and research-driven development (Ajayi & Ayodele, 2020).

When campus life is undermined by violence and organisational intimidation, instructional continuity, scholarly productivity, and the moral formation of future leaders suffer, with consequences that extend into local communities and the national polity [Nwankwo, 2017].

Understanding the ancestry of cultism, its historical origin, pathways of transformation, and proximate drivers is essential for designing institutional and policy responses that protect educational quality and support national development objectives.

This paper therefore traces the ancestry of cultism in Nigerian universities by (a) mapping situating the phenomenon within its colonial and post-colonial contexts; (b) mapping the transition from confraternity to violent cult network; (c) identifying the major social and institutional drivers; and (d) analysing the implications for education, security, human capital, the economy, and national values.

The analysis draws on historical accounts, peer-reviewed studies, and institutional reports to provide a theoretically informed basis for policy recommendations.

In academic discussion, the term ancestry refers to the origin, roots, and early developmental path of an idea, institution, or practice (Adewuyi, 2019).

When applied to student cultism in Nigeria, it concerns the historical journey of the phenomenon,

how it began, the forces that shaped it, and how it evolved over time.

Understanding ancestry in this sense helps trace the transformation from early campus confraternities to the complex cult networks operating today.

Cultism in Nigerian universities refers to secretive student groups that engage in secret initiation rites, loyalty oaths, and practices connected to intimidation, violence, and power-seeking behaviour (Ikelegbe, 2006; Ugwuoke, 2010).

While early confraternities emphasized brotherhood and intellectual solidarity, modern cult groups in many institutions are associated with rivalry, arms possession, extortion, and attacks against students and staff (Macrothink Research, 2019).

This shift underscores the importance of distinguishing between the historical origins and their later criminal evolution.

Universities are institutions mandated to provide advanced learning, knowledge production, and moral and civic development (Ajayi & Ayodele, 2020; Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2010).

Beyond classroom instruction, universities are expected to shape responsible citizens capable of contributing to national development.

Persistent cult activities undermine this mission by fostering fear, weakening academic culture, and eroding the ethical foundations of student life (Ojo, 2020).

National development involves the broad improvement of a nation's social, economic, educational, and security systems to enhance the quality of life for citizens.

In developing contexts, human capital, particularly skilled youth, is central to growth.

When universities become centres of violence and fear, national development is directly threatened through disruptions to learning, loss of talent, and weakened institutional integrity (Nwankwo, 2017).

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CULTISM IN NIGERIA

The emergence of cultism in Nigerian universities is rooted in the socio-cultural environment of the late colonial period.

University College Ibadan, founded in 1948, was modelled after British academic traditions and deeply influenced by hierarchical student cultures, elitist clubs, and exclusive social networks imported from Britain.

These structures shaped early student life and created visible divisions between students of privileged backgrounds and those from modest origins (Adewuyi, 2019).

Student nationalism also shaped campus life during this period.

Universities became centres of political consciousness and resistance to colonial control, encouraging student groups to organize around identity, intellectualism, and reformist ideals.

It was in this context, defined by colonial elitism, emerging nationalism, and intellectual activism that the first student confraternity was formed.

III. FORMATION OF THE FIRST CONFRATERNITY (1952)

In 1952, a group of students including Wole Soyinka founded the Pyrates Confraternity at the University College Ibadan (Adewuyi, 2019; Ikelegbe, 2006).

Their stated objectives included challenging elitism, promoting academic integrity, and encouraging social equality on campus.

At inception, the confraternity rejected tribalism, colonial-style elitism, and student oppression.

Its practices emphasized intellectual debate, camaraderie, and moral reform rather than violence or coercion (Ugwuoke, 2010).

The early confraternity operated openly and held no association with crime.

Instead, its activities aligned with anti-colonial youth movements and progressive student activism of the era.

The group's motto "against all conventions" reflected a commitment to social justice and intellectual freedom rather than militancy and violence (National Association of Seadogs, n.d.).

These early developments reveal that cultism in Nigerian universities did not originate as a violent phenomenon.

Instead, it evolved over time as a result of internal fragmentation, political influences, and socio-economic pressures.

These pushed confraternities toward secrecy and, eventually, criminal activity (Ugwuoke, 2010; Aghedo & Eke, 2019).

IV. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CULTISM IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Cultism in Nigerian universities traces back to 1952 with the formation of the Pyrates Confraternity at the University College, Ibadan (Ikelegbe, 2006).

Initially, the group positioned itself as a moral and intellectual vanguard against colonial elitism, racism, and student oppression.

Its founders, led by Wole Soyinka, aimed to promote social justice, academic integrity, and freedom of expression within the academic environment (National Association of Seadogs, n.d.; Adewuyi, 2019).

Over time, rival groups emerged, each claiming to represent student interests.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, confraternities had deviated from their original ideals.

The proliferation of competing groups led to factional rivalry, violent confrontations, and covert recruitment practices (Macrothink Research, 2019; Ugwuoke, 2010).

Military rule, political repression, and deteriorating campus conditions contributed to the shift from

intellectual activism to underground militancy (Aghedo & Eke, 2019).

V. THE 1990S MARKED A DANGEROUS ESCALATION

Cult groups became increasingly linked to weapons possession, targeted assassinations, and drug-related activities (Ikelegbe, 2006).

Political actors began to exploit these groups for intimidation, electoral manipulation, and violent enforcement, deepening their criminal footprint (Ojo & Adeyemi, 2022; Aghedo & Eke, 2019). The adoption of secret initiations, blood oaths, and violent rites further entrenched fear and secrecy, transforming what began as a cultural fellowship into a nationwide security threat (Suleiman, 2023). This trajectory reveals how a movement that once sought social reform evolved into a complex network associated with criminality and instability. Today, the legacy persists across campuses, influencing student culture, security policy, and national discourse on youth development and institutional safety.

VI. EMERGENCE OF FRACTAL CULT GROUPS IN NIGERIA

The persistence of cultism in Nigerian higher education reflects a complex mix of structural, psychological, and socio-cultural forces (Eze & Nwosu, 2022; Akinyemi & Ogunleye, 2021). Students do not join cults for a single reason; rather, they are influenced by overlapping drivers that operate at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Understanding these factors is important for developing sustainable interventions.

Many students enter university during a vulnerable stage of identity formation. In unfamiliar campus environments, they often seek social acceptance, protection, and a sense of belonging (Okafor, 2021). Cult groups exploit this emotional and social need by presenting themselves as "brotherhoods" that offer instant community, loyalty, and status. This appeal is strongest among students who feel socially invisible, alienated, or insecure, particularly first-year students adjusting to campus life (Eze & Nwosu, 2022; Oluwafemi, 2021).

Peer networks play a major role in recruitment (Bamidele, 2020). Once a student's friends or roommates belong to confraternities, subtle encouragement and coercion become powerful. Some join simply to fit in or avoid being left out of influential circles. Others yield to pressure to avoid harassment. This social contagion effect helps cult groups sustain cycles of membership across generations.

As violent clashes between rival groups have increased, self-defense has become a compelling justification for joining (Suleiman, 2023). Students believe cult membership protects them from bullying, threats, or exploitation, especially in campuses where formal security mechanisms appear weak (Yusuf & Abdulrahman, 2020). For others, the appeal lies in power, influence, and fear-based respect, as cult networks often control access to social dominance, party life, and intimidation mechanisms.

Students from dysfunctional families or unstable homes may be more vulnerable (Nnadozie & Eze, 2022). Exposure to domestic violence, community gangs, or absent parental guidance increases susceptibility to peer manipulation. For emotionally wounded youth, cults present a false sense of support and power (Eze & Nnaji, 2023).

Nigeria's educational system faces persistent challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, unstable academic calendars, and inadequate student support systems (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2010; Ajayi & Ayodele, 2020). For some students, cult activities become a coping mechanism or escape from academic stress and institutional frustration. Structural weaknesses like poor counseling services, limited student engagement programs, and absentee governing systems create an environment where deviant networks thrive (Ojo, 2020).

Where campus security, disciplinary structures are weak, and reporting systems ineffective, cultism flourishes (Omedi & Omede, 2015). Limited training for campus security personnel, slow administrative responses, and occasional collusion between staff and cult groups worsen the problem. Perceived impunity, rather than deterrence, becomes the norm (Yusuf & Abdulrahman, 2020).

Economic hardship is a powerful driver (Akinyemi & Ogunleye, 2021). Some students join cults to gain financial support, access lucrative networks, or participate in illegal activities such as extortion, gambling, or political mercenary work. Cult groups often promise financial survival and opportunities that struggling students find difficult to ignore, particularly in campuses located in high-poverty regions.

A troubling dimension of cult evolution in Nigeria is the involvement of external political actors (Ojo & Adeyemi, 2022). Cult groups have been weaponized in electoral cycles to intimidate opponents or mobilize youth violence (Aghedo & Eke, 2019). This sponsorship strengthens their legitimacy and operational capacity, making suppression harder. Political patronage reinforces a deadly cycle: student groups gain weapons and protection, while politicians secure loyal foot soldiers.

Media portrayals of cultism through music, movies, and social media, sometimes glamorize violence, loyalty, and alpha male dominance (Ajayi, 2021). Youth culture in urban centers has, at times, romanticized secrecy, rebellion, and street influence. For impressionable students, such representations normalize cult lifestyle, including symbols, slogans, and violent codes. The digital age has expanded recruitment channels and access to violent ideology (Oluwafemi, 2021).

Some students join cults not out of fear or poverty, but ambition in some universities, cults control social events, influence student politics, and shape campus hierarchy (Oluwafemi, 2021). Access to this "elite" circle, real or perceived, draws students who crave leadership, status, and influence without going through legitimate academic or moral processes.

A theoretical lens helps situate cultism not merely as deviant youth behavior, but as a structural and psychological response to power, identity, and group dynamics in Nigerian higher education. Two frameworks provide particularly strong insight: Social Identity Theory and Strain Theory.

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self and value from belonging to groups, particularly in environments where security is high

(Okafor, 2021; Olu Oluwafemi, 2021). Nigerian universities serve as intense social arenas where students seek identity, belonging, and recognition. In such contexts, confraternities function as “identity anchors,” offering members a sense of pride, fraternity, and symbolic prestige. This theory helps explain why competition for status or perceived superiority is central to cult structures. Members often internalize group superiority while perceiving outsiders as threats, fueling retaliatory cycles of violence and rivalry among cult factions. Thus, cultism becomes not only a tool for security or influence, but also a psychological refuge for students struggling with insecurity, anonymity, or social exclusion on campus.

Strain Theory, developed by Merton (1938), argues that deviant behavior emerges when individuals are unable to achieve socially approved goals through legitimate means. Nigerian university students navigate academic stress, scarce economic opportunities, unclear post-graduation prospects, and sometimes dysfunctional campus structures. When legitimate pathways to success, recognition, or power appear blocked, cultism may emerge as an alternative route to achieve social mobility, influence, or protection (Aghedo, 2015). In this sense, cults offer what appears to be an “informal reward system”: access to networks, political patronage, intimidation power, and perceived social capital. This aligns with the broader Nigerian socio-political environment, where power is often associated with force, connections, and informal influence rather than merit. Strain theory therefore situates cultism within the wider national struggle against inequality, weak institutions, and limited legitimate opportunities for upward mobility.

Social Identity Theory explains the psychosocial bonding and loyalty mechanisms, while Strain Theory explains the systemic pressures and motivations that sustain cultism (Okafor, 2021; Merton, 1938). These frameworks reinforce that cultism is not accidental or isolated; it emerges from deep social needs and structural gaps. Addressing it requires interventions that strengthen institutional capacity, create meaningful student support systems, and promote identity-building opportunities rooted in legitimate values and civic culture.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The consequences of cultism extend far beyond university campuses. It undermines the quality of education, weakens national security, wastes human capital, and contributes to a culture of fear and impunity (Nwankwo, 2017; Ogunyemi & Adewale, 2021). These impacts directly threaten Nigeria’s long-term development agenda, including national goals around education, innovation, security, and social stability.

VIII.

Cultism destabilizes learning environments, discourages open academic engagement, and reduces the attractiveness of Nigerian universities as centers of knowledge

(Ogunyemi & Adewale, 2021). The presence of violent confraternities creates fear and insecurity, leading many students to avoid campus activities or withdraw socially from academic life. Faculty members may also become targets of intimidation, weakening intellectual freedom and administrative authority. Institutions that experience recurrent cult clashes often suffer academic disruptions, prolonged school closures, and reputational damage, pushing some high-performing students to pursue education abroad (Okolie & Osaghae, 2020). This “brain flight” accelerates the erosion of research culture and hampers Nigeria’s ambitions to build a strong knowledge economy.

The evolution of student cult groups into violent networks has serious security implications (Ibrahim & Yakubu, 2023). Upon graduation or expulsion, many members transition into organized street gangs and political thugs, contributing to broader insecurity across the country (Otu & Elechi, 2021). Their involvement in extortion, kidnapping, election violence, and urban gang warfare widens the scope of insecurity beyond university environments. This dynamic increases pressure on security agencies and undermines national peace-building and crime-reduction strategies. In effect, the university becomes an incubator for criminal networks that later burden the state.

Nigeria's population is largely youthful, and tertiary students represent a potential engine for innovation and national progress. When these young people are drawn into cultism, many experience academic failure, trauma, incarceration, or premature death (Nwankwo, 2017). The long-term consequence is the loss of skilled manpower essential for national development. Families and communities also endure psychological and financial strain, innovation, infrastructure, or student development. This inefficiency deepens the fiscal strain on the already challenged education sector.

Cultism sustains a negative value system that normalizes violence, intimidation, and corruption [Aghedo, 2015]. The logic of force over merit prevalent in cult ideology mirrors and reinforces similar tendencies in wider Nigerian society [Ajayi, 2021]. As students internalize these norms, they enter the political and corporate world with distorted notions of leadership and power. This continuity between campus violence and national governance culture jeopardizes efforts to build ethical leadership, democratic culture, and institutions based on rule-of-law. In the long run, the normalization of violence weakens trust in public systems and reduces civic responsibility. Cultism undermines national development on multiple fronts such as education, security, economy, human capital, and values. It represents not just a student disciplinary problem, but a national threat requiring coordinated preventive and corrective strategies. Addressing it is essential to building a secure, knowledge-driven and ethically grounded Nigerian state.

IX. SUMMARY

Cultism in Nigerian universities originated in 1952 with the Pyrates Confraternity, founded as a non-violent, intellectual movement against elitism. However, internal fragmentation, military rule, and socio-political pressures in the late 20th century transformed these groups into violent, clandestine cult networks linked to crime and political exploitation.

The phenomenon is driven by systemic failures and psychological needs, explained by Social Identity Theory (seeking belonging and status) and Strain Theory (using cults as an alternative path to power

when legitimate means are blocked). Key factors include weak institutional governance, academic stress, peer pressure, and the crucial sponsorship by external political actors.

The implications for national development are severe: cultism weakens human capital, degrades the quality of education, fosters widespread insecurity by incubating organized crime, and sustains a national value system that normalizes

Addressing this threat, reducing campus-level corruption, strengthening campus security, improving leadership and mentorship, fostering ethical values, providing socio-economic support, and enhancing community-police collaboration are critical for reversing the trend.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enforce strict anti-cult policies and zero-tolerance stance.
- Strengthen Campus Security & Intelligence gathering modern detection mechanisms.
- Orientation Programs: Prioritize value-based education, ethics, and morality.
- Psychosocial Support Services: Counseling, mentorship, and career guidance mitigate vulnerabilities.
- Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: Engage parents, alumni networks, community leaders, religious groups, and local authorities. Policy Reforms: Review and harmonize university rules on cultism.
- Legislation and university regulations must criminalize and enforce sanctions against cult activities [Yusuf & Abdullahi, 2023].
- Student Development Programs: Promote healthy outlets for identity, belonging, and leadership [Eze & Nwankwo, 2023].
- Psychosocial Support and counseling approaches help moderate economic pressures driving cult membership.

- Encourage Legitimate Student Groups and empowerment structures, student clubs, societies.
- Policy and Funding: Universities should ensure student welfare and funding to reduce attraction to cults as alternate soft-paths for status.
- Government and regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) should review institutions' autonomy in handling campus crises.
- Systematic reform must address both prevention and rehabilitation for students seeking exit from cult groups.

XI. CONCLUSION

Cultism in Nigerian higher institutions, begun as a noble intellectual and social movement, has drifted into a dangerous structure marked by secrecy, coercion, and violence. The paper has shown historical, social and institutional factors that shaped its transformation. Addressing cultism is not only a campus-level concern; it's a national imperative to restore the wider society. With normalized violence, crime prevalence, and fear, cult activities weaken the labour force, undermine progress, and erode national values and long-term growth. Investment in prevention, firm enforcement, and supportive systems can return campuses to nurturing environments where learning, character and ethical leadership thrive. Nigerian universities and communities face a serious challenge: our institutions, families, and youth must have strong, coherent reforms and actions to remain centres of knowledge, pride, and ethical leadership.

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