
ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING CULTISM AND CULT-RELATED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Cultism and cult-related violence have become major security, social, and developmental challenges in Nigeria, particularly within tertiary institutions and urban communities. This paper examines the prevalence, factors, and effects of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria while proposing strategic measures for addressing the problem. Drawing from secondary data sources including academic journals, government reports, and documented cases, the study employs a quantitative review of existing literature supported by the anomie/strain theory as its theoretical framework. Findings reveal that cultism, which began as campus fraternities in the 1950s, has evolved into violent criminal networks involved in armed robbery, political thuggery, assassinations, and community terror. The factors influencing cultism include poverty, unemployment, peer group pressure, weak parental supervision, poor campus security, political patronage, the rise of ethnic militias, and the glorification of violence in media and popular culture. The paper also identifies the severe effects of cultism on education, public security, socio-economic development, politics, and the psychological wellbeing of citizens. Disruptions of academic calendars, increased violent crime rates, electoral violence, economic losses, and widespread trauma are among the most pressing consequences. In response, the paper advocates for a holistic, multi-sectoral approach involving law enforcement reforms, educational sector improvements, youth employment initiatives, community engagement programmes, legislative strengthening, and an end to political patronage of cult groups. The paper concludes that unless urgent, coordinated, and sustained interventions are implemented, cultism will continue to undermine Nigeria's security, democratic process, and human development potential.

Keywords: Cultism, Violence, Tertiary Institutions, Youth Criminality, Political Thuggery, Nigeria.

Introduction

Cultism in Nigeria refers to the formation and operation of secret societies or clandestine groups within institutions, particularly universities, whose activities are concealed from the public and authorities. These groups typically engage in ritual practices, initiation ceremonies, and violent confrontations to assert dominance, seek protection, or achieve material and political benefits (Adewale, 2019). Historically, the roots of cultism in Nigeria can be traced back to 1952 when a group of seven students at the University College Ibadan, led by Professor Wole Soyinka,

established the Pyrates Confraternity (also known as the National Association of Seadogs). The founding objectives were essentially noble to combat oppression, elitism, and corruption in the educational and societal system of colonial Nigeria, promote equality, and uphold integrity and intellectual engagement (Adigwe & Ahmadu, 2018).

However, the success and influence of the Pyrates Confraternity inspired the emergence of splinter groups such as the Buccaneers (1963), Eiye Confraternity (1965), and Aiye (Black Axe) (1970s). Over time, these groups diverged from the original ideals and became vehicles for criminal activities, power struggles, and campus violence, especially in the 1980s and 1990s (Agboola & Ogunode, 2021). Several scholars have argued that the politicization of student activism by successive military regimes in Nigeria created fertile ground for cultism to fester. Politicians and university administrators began using cult groups as instruments for suppressing dissent, manipulating student elections, and intimidating perceived enemies (Ogunade, 2020). This marked a dangerous shift from ideological student movements to violent and criminal secret societies.

By the late 1990s, cultism had spread beyond the university campuses into polytechnics, colleges of education, secondary schools, and urban communities. Today, cult-related activities are no longer confined to academic environments but have permeated street gangs, motor parks, political campaigns, markets, and neighborhoods, becoming a major source of insecurity and violent crime (Nwankwo, 2021).

Current hotspots for cultism and related violence include Lagos, Rivers, Edo, Delta, Ogun, and Anambra States. These regions frequently witness deadly cult clashes, public executions, armed robbery, and politically-motivated assassinations linked to cult groups (Amnesty International, 2020). The infiltration of cult groups into Nigeria's socio-political structure has further entrenched them as a recurring challenge to public peace, democratic governance, and national security. Additionally, new cult groups have emerged with more sophisticated structures, deadly initiation rituals, and advanced recruitment techniques, including the use of social media and mobile technology for coordination, propaganda, and intimidation (Okoro, 2020).

Problem Statement

In contemporary Nigeria, cultism and its associated violence have become a deeply entrenched socio-political problem. While it began within university environments as a form of intellectual brotherhood, it has rapidly degenerated into a highly organized, criminal, and politically instrumental phenomenon. Cult groups now engage in a wide range of violent activities including murder, armed robbery, drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape, electoral thuggery, and community terrorization (Agboola & Ogunode, 2021). The escalating brutality of cult-related violence poses a significant threat to Nigeria's internal security, educational sector, socio-economic development, and democratic processes. In tertiary institutions, cultism has resulted in campus insecurity, murder of students and lecturers, disruption of academic calendars, increased dropout rates, and a culture of fear and silence (Ogunade, 2020).

More broadly, cult-related violence contributes to the deterioration of public safety, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where cult groups extort, intimidate, and engage in bloody territorial clashes. According to a 2021 Nigeria Police Force Report, over 2,500 cultism-related arrests and 500 fatalities were recorded between 2018 and 2020, with many cases going unreported due to fear of reprisals and lack of faith in law enforcement (Nigeria Police Force, 2021). Politically, cult

groups have been widely used for electoral manipulation, voter intimidation, and assassination of opponents. Their involvement in politics not only undermines the integrity of elections but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions (Amnesty International, 2020).

The socio-economic consequences of cult-related violence are equally alarming. It affects local businesses, discourages investment in volatile areas, increases public health costs due to injury management, and weakens productive human capital due to deaths and trauma (Nwankwo, 2021). Furthermore, it perpetuates cycles of violence and criminality as young people recruited into cult groups often find it difficult to disengage, becoming lifelong participants in violent activities. The persistence of cultism is further enabled by institutional weaknesses, such as ineffective law enforcement, corruption within security agencies, weak judicial systems, and the absence of effective rehabilitation programmes for reformed cultists (Adewale, 2019).

Although, several studies have explored the origins, manifestations, and consequences of cultism, particularly within Nigerian tertiary institutions (Adewale, 2019; Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018; Ogunade, 2020). These works have largely emphasized the historical evolution of cult groups, their operational structures on campuses, and the effects on educational environments such as academic disruption, insecurity, and student victimization. However, there are notable gaps that this paper seeks to address. Firstly, while previous studies have predominantly focused on university-based cultism, limited scholarly attention has been given to the increasing spillover of cult-related violence into Nigeria's wider socio-political and community landscape, including its role in street gangs, urban criminal syndicates, and politically-motivated violence during elections (Nwankwo, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020).

Secondly, only few empirical analyses have holistically examined the multi-dimensional factors driving the persistent growth and brutality of cultism in both educational institutions and the broader society. Most of these prior works isolate causes such as poverty, peer pressure, or political manipulation without integrating these with emerging drivers like the role of digital technology, particularly social media, in-cult recruitment, operational coordination, and intimidation tactics (Okoro, 2020).

Thirdly, while some policy recommendations exist, they often lack context-specific, strategic, and integrated multi-sectoral solutions that actively engage government, educational institutions, security agencies, communities, and civil society in a coordinated and sustainable response (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Many of these interventions have also failed to consider the psychological, socio-economic, and political dimensions of cultism beyond its criminal aspects (Adewale, 2019). Hence, this paper attempts to fill these identified gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria, taken into cognizance the prevalence, effects and strategic measures against cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The paper was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the prevalence of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria?
2. What are the factors influencing cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria?
3. What are the effects of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria?
4. What are the strategic measures against cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria?

Research Objectives

This paper provides the analysis of factors influencing cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria. In specification, the paper:

1. Examined the prevalence of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria.
2. Analyzed the factors influencing cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria.
3. Assessed the effects of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria.
4. Proposed strategic measures against cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria.

Methodology

The paper utilized content analysis as the principal analytical technique, examining existing literature and documented evidence related to cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria. This approach enabled the paper to critically synthesize patterns, trends, and factors influencing the phenomenon within the Nigerian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Robert K. Merton's Anomie/Strain Theory (1938), which explains deviant behavior as a product of the tension between culturally approved goals and limited access to legitimate means of achieving them. Building on Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie, Merton argued that societal structures can pressure individuals, particularly marginalized youth, into deviance when legitimate opportunities are scarce (Merton, 1938; Haralambos&Holborn, 2013). In modern societies like Nigeria, where success is measured by wealth, power, and social status, the unequal distribution of resources such as quality education and employment creates strain, leading some to pursue alternative, often violent, means of attainment.

Merton identified five modes of adaptation, with "innovation" being most relevant here, describing individuals who accept societal goals but adopt illegitimate means, such as cultism, to achieve them. This theory aptly explains how socio-economic hardship, institutional failure, and cultural pressures fuel youth involvement in cult-related violence. It also highlights how cultism has become institutionalized as both a survival strategy and a path to social mobility. The theory's relevance to Nigeria has been supported by empirical studies on youth deviance and cult violence (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021; Adewale, 2019; Ogunade, 2020).

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

All the necessary concepts germane to this paper were given proper review at this segment.

Cult

The term "cult" varies in meaning across cultural, religious, and sociopolitical contexts but generally refers to a secretive group bound by shared beliefs, rituals, and loyalty to a leader or ideology, often operating outside societal norms (Richardson, 1993). In Nigeria, the term carries a negative connotation, particularly within educational and political settings, where cults are linked to violence, ritualism, and criminality (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Adewale (2019) describes cults as clandestine groups marked by oath-taking, initiation rites, and strict loyalty, frequently engaging in violent acts. While traditional African cults once served spiritual and communal roles, modern Nigerian cults are notorious for their disruptive influence in schools,

politics, and urban communities (Okoro, 2020). For this study, a cult is defined as a secretive, hierarchical group that fosters internal solidarity and often engages in violence, intimidation, and criminal activities.

Cultism

Cultism refers to the belief in, promotion of, and participation in the activities of secret groups characterized by violence, anti-social behavior, and loyalty to confraternities over societal laws (Ogunade, 2020). Olaleye (2016) describes it as organized membership in secret societies, often within schools or political spaces, involving violent rituals, oaths, and criminal objectives. Its features include initiation rites, use of intimidation, territorial clashes, and strict allegiance to the group. In Nigeria, cultism emerged in tertiary institutions in the 1970s and 1980s as student confraternities, originally formed for social and intellectual purposes, evolved into violent sects (Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018). Today, it extends beyond campuses into streets, political arenas, and even law enforcement, posing a significant socio-political threat (Nwankwo, 2021). Okoro (2020) identifies factors such as social inequality, unemployment, political manipulation, and weakened institutional authority as key drivers of cultism in Nigeria.

Cult-Related Violence

Cult-related violence refers to violent acts carried out by cult members during rival clashes, initiations, reprisals, or for economic and political gains. It is a major consequence of cultism, affecting public safety, education, governance, and economic stability. Adewale (2019) describes it as premeditated, organized, and often ritualized aggression in pursuit of a group's objectives. Such acts include inter-group clashes, assassinations, intimidation, political thuggery, and extortion. Amnesty International (2020) reported numerous killings and displacements in the Niger Delta linked to cult groups armed by politicians and local warlords. Agboola and Ogunode (2021) note that this violence persists due to weak law enforcement and frequent impunity. Cult-related killings often arise from failed recruitment, leadership disputes, territorial control, or political manipulation.

Prevalence of Cultism and Cult-Related Violence in Nigeria

The phenomenon of cultism in Nigeria can be traced back to the early 1950s, with the formation of the Pyrates Confraternity at the University College Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) in 1952 by a group of seven students led by Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. Initially, the group was conceived as an intellectual brotherhood committed to promoting social justice, equality, and anti-colonial activism within the university community (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). However, by the late 1970s and 1980s, ideological cracks, leadership disputes, and rivalry among splinter groups led to the proliferation of confraternities such as the Buccaneers, Eiye Confraternity, Black Axe, and Vikings, many of which abandoned intellectual pursuits in favour of violent competition for control, recognition, and material benefits (Ogunade, 2020). This shift marked the transformation of cultism from a campus-based, elitist association to a violent and secretive underground network. By the 1990s, cult activities had expanded beyond university campuses into Nigeria's urban streets, ghettos, and political spaces, where confraternities began to be used as tools for electoral violence, criminal activities, and community intimidation (Nwankwo, 2021).

In contemporary Nigeria, cult-related violence is prevalent across the country but is especially concentrated in certain geopolitical zones and institutions. The South-South and South-West regions have been consistently identified as epicenters of cult activities. States such as Rivers, Delta, Edo, Lagos, and Ogun are notorious for violent cult clashes, political thuggery, and community-based cultism (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). This geographic pattern of prevalence is linked to factors such as dense urban settlements, youth unemployment, weakened law enforcement, and the patronage of cult groups by local political elites (Okoro, 2020). Tertiary institutions have remained traditional hotspots for cult activities, with universities like the University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt, Lagos State University, and OlabisiOnabanjo University repeatedly featuring in police reports and academic studies for cult-related incidents (Ogunade, 2020). Furthermore, cult violence has been increasingly documented in urban slums and riverine communities, where cult groups operate as territorial gangs engaged in extortion, armed robbery, and gang wars, often with impunity (Amnesty International, 2020).

Despite underreporting and the lack of comprehensive official statistics, available data paint a grim picture of the scale and persistence of cult-related violence in Nigeria. According to Amnesty International (2020), over 500 deaths were linked to cult-related clashes in Rivers and Bayelsa states alone between 2015 and 2020. Similarly, the Nigeria Police Force (2021) recorded over 160 cult-related killings and approximately 300 arrests across Nigeria in 2020, with Lagos, Edo, and Delta States accounting for the highest numbers. Agboola and Ogunode (2021) further noted that cult-related violence was responsible for nearly 20% of violent youth-related deaths in tertiary institutions in South-West Nigeria between 2017 and 2020. Media and civil society reports have also documented numerous cases of killings, maiming, and displacement linked to cult wars during initiation ceremonies, anniversaries, and inter-group rivalry episodes (Adewale, 2019). While these figures likely underestimate the true extent of the problem, they nonetheless underscore the severity and growing scale of cultism in both urban and educational settings.

The operational tactics of cult groups in Nigeria are typically characterized by secrecy, violent rituals, and strict hierarchical loyalty. Cult groups enforce rigid codes of conduct, secrecy oaths, and deadly consequences for betrayal or defection (Ogunade, 2020). Initiation rites often involve the consumption of blood-like substances, physical assault, and dangerous rituals meant to bond new recruits to the group's identity and ideology (Okoro, 2020). Violent territorial clashes between rival cult groups are common, particularly over control of school campuses, streets, or access to political favours and contracts. Cult groups have also been implicated in political thuggery, where they are hired by politicians to intimidate opponents, disrupt electoral processes, and enforce control in contested areas (Nwankwo, 2021). Beyond politics, confraternities engage in organized criminal activities such as armed robbery, drug trafficking, assassinations, and extortion, particularly in urban slums and economically marginalized communities (Agboola & Ogunode, 2021). Cult groups also use intimidation tactics to control campus politics and extort money from fellow students and university administrators, often operating with the complicity or negligence of campus security services (Adewale, 2019).

Numerous confraternities operate within Nigeria's tertiary institutions and urban communities, each with distinct identities, codes, and operational histories. The Pyrates Confraternity (National Association of Seadogs), founded in 1952, is historically regarded as the pioneer group but has largely distanced itself from modern cult violence (Ogunade, 2020). The Buccaneers Confraternity (National Association of Sea Lords) emerged in 1972 and quickly gained notoriety

for violent campus clashes and criminal exploits. The Black Axe (Aye Confraternity) remains one of the most violent and widespread cult groups in Nigeria, with extensive involvement in street crime, political violence, and international organized crime syndicates (Okoro, 2020). The Eiyé Confraternity (Air Lords) is also notorious for violent territorial wars, particularly against rival groups like the Black Axe and Vikings Confraternity (De Norsemen Kclub of Nigeria). Other groups such as the KKK, Mafia, Red Beret, and Supreme Vikings Confraternity have established themselves in various regions, often adopting distinct colors, signs, and operational slogans while engaging in similar violent and criminal activities (Adigwe & Ahmadu, 2018). These confraternities are typically characterized by militaristic command structures, blood oaths, and cult-specific initiation rituals.

Factors Influencing Cultism and Cult-Related Violence in Nigeria

Some of the factors influencing cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria are discussed in this part of the paper.

Parental Background

Parental socio-economic status, family structure, and the quality of home-based supervision are significant social factors influencing youth involvement in cultism in Nigeria. Numerous studies have documented a strong association between unstable family environments and juvenile delinquency, including participation in secret cults (Adewale, 2019; Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018). Okoro (2020) emphasizes that youths from broken homes, polygamous households, and impoverished families often lack emotional stability, adequate supervision, and positive value orientation, making them vulnerable to negative peer influence and deviant subcultures such as confraternities. Similarly, Agboola and Ogunode (2021) argue that the absence of responsible parental figures whether due to divorce, death, absenteeism, or parental neglect creates a psychological void that cult groups readily exploit by offering surrogate families, brotherhood, and social protection.

In affluent but dysfunctional homes, children raised in permissive environments where criminal behaviours are normalized or ignored are also susceptible to cult involvement, often as a demonstration of rebellion or to attain social prestige (Nwankwo, 2021). The home, being the primary socialization agent, significantly shapes youths' attitudes toward violence and authority; hence, dysfunctional family backgrounds are a recurrent risk factor in cult recruitment patterns across Nigerian universities and urban slums (Ogunade, 2020).

Peer Group Influence

Peer pressure has long been established as one of the most direct and influential determinants of youth involvement in cultism, particularly in Nigeria's tertiary institutions and marginalized urban communities. As adolescents and young adults seek social acceptance, recognition, and protection, the influence of peer groups can override parental values and institutional regulations (Adewale, 2019). Adigwe and Ahmadu (2018) highlight that cult membership is often presented to prospective recruits by peers as a means of gaining respect, material benefits, and a sense of belonging. In tertiary institutions, peer pressure is especially strong during early years on campus, when students are adjusting to newfound independence, academic stress, and social stratification (Ogunade, 2020).

Cult groups strategically target new students, leveraging friendship networks, hostel affiliations, and student politics to entice them into confraternity activities. Agboola and Ogunode (2021) report that in over 60% of documented cases of campus cultism, victims cited peer influence as the primary reason for joining. The role of peer groups is even more pronounced in urban ghettos, where confraternities double as street gangs, and young people are pressured into violent groups for survival, protection, or access to illicit opportunities (Okoro, 2020).

Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic deprivation has been widely acknowledged as a significant driver of cultism and cult-related violence in Nigeria. High levels of poverty, youth unemployment, and economic inequality create a fertile environment for the growth of deviant subcultures, including cult groups (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Nigeria's unemployment rate, which stood at over 33% in 2020, disproportionately affects young people, leaving many economically marginalized and vulnerable to recruitment by cult groups offering promises of protection, financial gain, and social status (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). According to Adewale (2019), young people, particularly in urban slums and university environments, join confraternities as a perceived shortcut to wealth, power, and security in a society where legitimate opportunities are scarce. Additionally, cult groups often serve as surrogate families or support systems for disaffected youth, especially in volatile urban centers where unemployment, crime, and violence are rampant (Okoro, 2020).

Educational Factors

The Nigerian educational system, particularly its tertiary institutions, has been both a breeding ground and a primary battleground for cult activities. Weak campus governance, lax security arrangements, overcrowding, and academic frustrations have contributed to the rise of cultism in higher institutions (Ogunade, 2020). The collapse of effective student unionism and extracurricular outlets has also left a void that is increasingly filled by violent confraternities (Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018). Many students join cult groups in search of belonging, identity, or protection against rival students and lecturers perceived as oppressive (Nwankwo, 2021). Adewale (2019) observed that peer pressure plays a critical role in cult recruitment, particularly during student elections or power struggles over hostel control and campus racketeering. Academic stress and the absence of adequate counseling services have also been linked to cult involvement, as disillusioned students seek solace or revenge through violent confraternities (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021).

Political Factors

Political factors have significantly exacerbated cultism in Nigeria, particularly since the 1990s, when politicians began openly patronizing cult groups for electoral violence, intimidation of opponents, and control of polling stations (Nwankwo, 2021). Politicians offer cult groups financial incentives, arms, and protection from prosecution in exchange for their services during elections and political rallies (Amnesty International, 2020). This mutually beneficial relationship has not only sustained cultism but has also emboldened confraternities to expand their influence beyond campuses into urban neighborhoods and rural communities (Okoro, 2020). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) note that this politicization of cultism has blurred the lines between student

confraternities and criminal street gangs, creating highly organized, well-funded cult networks capable of perpetrating violence with relative impunity. Furthermore, cult groups are increasingly used for post-election violence, control of local markets, and enforcement of political loyalty, contributing to the institutionalization of political thuggery and electoral malpractice (Ogunade, 2020).

Social and Cultural Factors

The erosion of traditional African moral values, the breakdown of family structures, and the glorification of violence in contemporary Nigerian popular culture have collectively fostered a socio-cultural environment conducive to cultism. The decline of communal moral authority and weakening parental supervision have left many young people susceptible to peer influence and deviant subcultures (Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018). Okoro (2020) highlights that films, music, and social media increasingly glamorize wealth acquired through violence, criminality, or cult membership, reinforcing the appeal of cultism to unemployed and disillusioned youth.

In addition, the desire for group solidarity, identity, and protection in hostile environments, such as urban ghettos and overcrowded campuses, has also contributed to the growth of cult groups (Adewale, 2019). Nwankwo (2021) further observes that traditional initiation rituals and oaths, inherited from indigenous secret societies, have been modernized and incorporated into cult activities, adding a cultural dimension to the persistence of cultism.

Ethnic Militia and Ethno-political Violence

The intersection between ethnic militancy and cultism in Nigeria has become increasingly evident, particularly in the Niger Delta and South-West geopolitical zones. Ethnic militias, originally established to defend regional or ethnic interests, have occasionally adopted cult-like structures, operational tactics, and violent rituals (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Groups such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the South-West, Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta, and Bakassi Boys in the South-East have been known to operate with confraternity-like secrecy, oaths of allegiance, and organized violence (Amnesty International, 2020). Nwankwo (2021) explains that alliances between cult groups and ethnic militias have increased the scale and complexity of violent crime in Nigeria, especially during political campaigns and communal disputes.

In Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta states, for instance, cult groups have merged with ethnic militias to enforce control over oil-producing communities, intimidate political opponents, and engage in organized crime under the guise of ethnic self-determination (Okoro, 2020). This fusion of cult and militia operations has not only militarized local conflicts but has also created a criminal underworld with deep political and economic roots, making cult violence harder to contain through conventional policing (Ogunade, 2020).

Weak Law Enforcement and JusticeSystem

Another critical factor sustaining cultism in Nigeria is the weakness of the law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Police corruption, inadequate training, poor equipment, and lack of accountability have hindered the effective suppression of cult-related violence (Amnesty International, 2020). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) assert that many cult cases are either poorly investigated or deliberately suppressed, especially when cult groups enjoy political backing. The judicial system is equally compromised, with delays in prosecution, lack of witness protection

programmes, and lenient sentencing undermining deterrence. According to Ogunade (2020), many arrested cult members are released without trial due to police inefficiency or political intervention. The absence of effective deterrents and sanctions emboldens cult groups to operate openly, knowing that the chances of arrest, conviction, and imprisonment are minimal (Okoro, 2020).

Technology and Media Factors

In recent years, the use of technology and digital platforms has also influenced the operations and proliferation of cult groups in Nigeria. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become tools for cult recruitment, coordination of attacks, and the dissemination of violent propaganda (Nwankwo, 2021). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) note that cultists now use encrypted messaging apps to plan operations, target rivals, and circulate videos of violent acts to intimidate opponents and recruit new members. Technology also facilitates the mobilization of dispersed members, enabling cult groups to extend their networks beyond campuses to cities and even across international borders. Ogunade (2020) observed that social media has amplified the glamorization of cult lifestyles, allowing confraternities to showcase their activities, symbols, and rituals in ways that attract admiration from vulnerable youth audiences.

Effects of Cultism and Cult-Related Violence in Nigeria

Cultism has had a devastating impact on Nigeria's educational system, particularly in tertiary institutions, where it disrupts academic activities, instills fear, and erodes the intellectual culture on campuses. Violent confrontations between rival cult groups have led to the closure of universities, suspension of academic programmes, and forced relocation of students and staff (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Adewale (2019) notes that frequent cult clashes often result in the loss of lives, destruction of school property, and disruption of examinations, leading to prolonged academic sessions and student dropouts. The presence of cult groups on campuses also undermines the learning environment by instilling fear among students, lecturers, and administrators, who sometimes become targets of intimidation, kidnapping, or assassination for resisting cult influence (Ogunade, 2020). Additionally, the recruitment of students into confraternities weakens academic discipline and fosters a culture of lawlessness, thereby affecting overall academic performance and institutional integrity (Okoro, 2020).

Beyond educational institutions, cult-related violence constitutes a significant threat to public safety and national security in Nigeria. Cult groups have increasingly transformed into urban gangs and criminal syndicates that engage in armed robbery, extortion, assassinations, and territorial battles, particularly in major cities such as Lagos, Benin City, and Port Harcourt (Amnesty International, 2020). These violent confrontations often involve the use of firearms, machetes, and other lethal weapons, resulting in deaths, injuries, and displacement of residents. Nwankwo (2021) argues that cultism has contributed to the general breakdown of law and order in many urban communities, where cult groups operate parallel security systems and impose levies on businesses. The inability of law enforcement agencies to effectively curb cult-related violence has emboldened these groups to act with impunity, undermining state authority and fostering a culture of impunity in many Nigerian cities (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021).

Furthermore, the socio-economic consequences of cultism in Nigeria are far-reaching, affecting both individual livelihoods and national development. Violent cult clashes often result in the

destruction of public and private property, thereby imposing financial burdens on affected communities and local governments (Okoro, 2020). Health systems are strained by the influx of victims of cult violence, while businesses in cult-dominated areas suffer frequent disruptions and extortion by cultists (Adewale, 2019). Additionally, many tertiary institutions suffer from reputational damage due to cult-related incidents, leading to reduced enrollment and loss of credibility (Ogunade, 2020). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) observe that in areas heavily affected by cultism, investors and entrepreneurs are often discouraged from investing due to insecurity, thereby exacerbating unemployment and poverty. Cultism also fuels organized crime networks that engage in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and electoral violence, all of which contribute to Nigeria's persistent socio-economic instability (Amnesty International, 2020).

In addition, cultism has significantly influenced Nigeria's political landscape, primarily through its role in electoral violence, political thuggery, and the manipulation of public opinion. Politicians across various levels of government have patronized cult groups, employing them as private militias for ballot snatching, voter intimidation, and the elimination of political opponents (Nwankwo, 2021). This phenomenon has undermined the credibility of electoral processes, contributed to voter apathy, and weakened democratic institutions (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). The entrenchment of cultists in local politics also facilitates the corruption of governance processes, as cult leaders often leverage their connections with political patrons to secure government contracts, positions, or immunity from prosecution (Okoro, 2020). Furthermore, the use of cult groups for political violence deepens ethno-regional tensions, especially in Nigeria's volatile Niger Delta and South-West regions, where political contests frequently turn violent (Amnesty International, 2020).

Finally, the psychological and social consequences of cultism on Nigerian society are profound, affecting victims, perpetrators, and communities alike. Survivors of cult violence often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Adewale, 2019). Students in cult-dominated campuses live in constant fear, limiting their social interactions and participation in academic and extracurricular activities (Ogunade, 2020). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) argue that widespread fear of reprisal attacks by cult groups discourages community members from reporting crimes or cooperating with law enforcement, thereby fostering a culture of silence and impunity. Socially, cultism contributes to the breakdown of communal cohesion, trust, and intergenerational relationships, especially in urban ghettos where cult gangs control neighborhoods and enforce violent codes of conduct (Okoro, 2020). The pervasive climate of fear and suspicion not only impairs social relations but also diminishes public confidence in the state's capacity to protect its citizens (Nwankwo, 2021).

Strategic Measures against Cultism and Cult-Related Violence in Nigeria

Addressing cultism in Nigeria requires comprehensive reforms across law enforcement, education, socio-economic structures, and governance. Current policing efforts are hindered by corruption, poor training, and political interference (Amnesty International, 2020). Agboola and Ogunode (2021) advocate for specialized anti-cultism units within the Nigeria Police Force, equipped with modern intelligence and forensic tools. Swift prosecution and the establishment of special courts for cult-related crimes have been recommended to ensure deterrent sentencing (Okoro, 2020), alongside witness protection programs to encourage public cooperation

(Adewale, 2019). Community policing frameworks remain vital for rebuilding trust and improving information sharing (Nwankwo, 2021).

Tertiary institutions, as cultism hotspots, require educational reforms. Improved campus security, intelligence collaboration, and anti-cultism sensitization are necessary (Ogunade, 2020). Adigwe and Ahmadu (2018) recommend integrating moral and civic education into curricula, alongside orientation programs and strict disciplinary measures (Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Recreational, counseling, and extracurricular activities can offer alternative social outlets for students (Adewale, 2019). Furthermore, socio-economic deprivation fuels cultism, making job creation and poverty alleviation essential. Agboola and Ogunode (2021) emphasize youth employment and entrepreneurship programs, while Okoro (2020) highlights vocational training and microcredit schemes. Investment in infrastructure, healthcare, and education is equally important (Amnesty International, 2020).

Community participation is crucial. Local vigilante groups, religious leaders, and NGOs should partner with law enforcement to identify cult hotspots and mediate conflicts (Nwankwo, 2021). Public awareness campaigns and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are also recommended (Adigwe&Ahmadu, 2018; Agboola&Ogunode, 2021). Finally, dismantling political alliances with cult groups requires strong political will and impartial law enforcement (Amnesty International, 2020; Okoro, 2020). Harmonizing and enforcing anti-cultism legislation, introducing stiffer penalties, and addressing cyber cultism are essential legal measures (Ogunade, 2020; Nwankwo, 2021). Provisions for the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-cultists can help break cycles of violence (Adewale, 2019).

Empirical Review

Several studies confirm that cultism remains widespread in Nigeria, particularly in tertiary institutions and urban areas. Ajayi (2022) reported frequent violent clashes, extortion, and kidnappings in Niger Delta campuses, often linked to territorial control and local revenue disputes. Agetue and Ogodu (2022) found over 70% of students at Delta State Polytechnic had witnessed cult-related violence, including armed attacks and murders. Historical cases, such as the 1999 ObafemiAwolowo University massacre, highlight the persistent and growing threat of cultism. Nwaogu et al. (2020) recorded increasing cult-related fatalities in Nigeria's South-South and South-West, while Amnesty International (2020) documented politically driven cult killings, particularly in Rivers, Lagos, and Edo States, showing cultism's evolution into organized criminal and political enterprises.

Several factors drive cultism in Nigeria. Ajayi (2022) identified socio-economic deprivation, unemployment, and peer pressure, with 60% of students acknowledging peer influence in recruitment. Usman et al. (2021) linked poverty, youth unemployment, and land disputes to cult violence in Lagos. Family dysfunction also contributes, with studies by Nwaogu et al. (2020) and Ebere and Batram (2022) showing that broken homes increase youth vulnerability. Ogunade (2020) added that poor campus security and harsh academic conditions foster cult activity. Political patronage, ethnic militias, and land conflicts further complicate the problem (Nwankwo, 2021; Usman et al., 2021). Media glamorization of violence has also normalized cult practices among youths (Okoro, 2020).

Cultism's consequences are severe. Agboola and Ogunode (2021) reported that it disrupts academic activities and fosters insecurity, while Ebere and Batram (2022) noted its impact on

student deaths, dropout rates, and intellectual decline. Beyond campuses, cult groups engage in armed robbery, kidnappings, and political violence (Gbenemene, 2016), destabilizing communities and hindering socio-economic development (Okoro, 2020). Psychologically, victims and communities suffer trauma and anxiety (Adewale, 2019). To address this, Agetue and Ogodu (2022) recommended mobile anti-cult units and intensive student counseling. Ajayi (2022) advocated anti-cultism education, while Ebere and Batram (2022) suggested stronger school-parent collaboration. Usman et al. (2021) emphasized community-based interventions, and Nwankwo (2021) proposed political reforms and stricter penalties for politically-motivated cult activities. Amnesty International (2020) called for updated anti-cultism laws, special courts, and witness protection.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper examined the prevalence, causes, and consequences of cultism in Nigeria. It revealed that cultism has evolved from harmless fraternities to violent, criminal, and politically manipulated groups. Key drivers include poverty, unemployment, peer pressure, family dysfunction, weak campus security, political patronage, and media glorification of violence. The effects are extensive, including disruptions in education, increased insecurity, deaths, business disruption, and psychological trauma. Cultism also undermines electoral integrity and good governance. Given its complex nature, the study recommends a multi-sectoral response involving law enforcement reforms, improved campus security, value-based education, job creation, community involvement, political accountability, and strict anti-cultism legislation. Urgent and sustained collective action is essential to safeguard Nigeria's educational institutions, communities, and national development.

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