

CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCH IN MITIGATING INCESSANT CULT CLASH AMONG YOUTH IN AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

This abstract examines the major role played by churches in Awka, Anambra State, in addressing the escalating issue of youth cult clashes. Churches in the community actively engage in moral education, counseling, and outreach initiatives aimed at steering young people away from involvement in cult activities. By promoting values of peace, unity, and ethical conduct, churches contribute significantly to reducing violence and fostering a safer environment. This study will be of significant value relevant to parents or guardians, policy makers, stakeholders involved in maintaining law and order and religious institutions in Nigeria. It will be able to address the downside effects of cultism on the society at large and also, dispel the erroneous ideas among youths that there are benefits of cultism, which is targeted at enticing and luring innocent non-members. The geographical scope of this research work revolves around Awka town. The study will center on cultism as an organized violent group in Awka. Here, relevant instances and inferences would be drawn from the Church or Christianity as a social organization capable of ameliorating this dysfunctional trend. The data collected in this research are both from primary and secondary sources, such as previous works of foreign and local authors who have written on the relevant issues in journals, books of reading, internet documentaries and lecture notes. The primary sources include both participant and non-participant methods of observation.

Keywords: Contribution, Church, Mitigate, Incessant, Cult, Youth, Awka, Anambra State

Introduction

Awka, like many other cities in Nigeria, has witnessed a rise in youth involvement in cult activities over the years. The territory known as Awka today has been inhabited by men for several centuries. Four families namely Achallaaji, Agbana, Umunemoke, and Umudiaba came to live with Urueri, merged with Urueri and all became known as “Nkwelle”. Meanwhile, when the main body of Amaenyiana dispersed, Ndu continued to live where he was until another tragedy struck which was the murder of thirty of his grandsons by a group

of warriors from neighboring town hostile to Awka. Recovering from the shock of this tragedy, he left and with his people moved down to the present day Umayom village site, to start the Ayom-na-Okpala community (consisting Umayom, Umunoke, Umuoramma and Umuokpu) and it was from the Ayom-na-Okpala, from the Umuoramma family, that a warrior group (Anyia) went out to the boundary of Awka and Nawfia and founded Umuokpu village; and from Umuokpu village, they founded Umuokpu-Obunagu village which was later renamed Amikwo Obunagu. Nkwelle, comprising the families of Achallaaji, Umunenoke, Agbana, and Umudiana settled with Urueri, and became one with them and gradually became the dominant community for while the Urueri became smaller and smaller in numbers, Nkwelle increased (Okafor,1992).

While all Ifiteana were still living at Nkwelle, an Okpo man called Ikwo de aku, a doctor, while hunting for herbs, discovered near Udede Lake another luscious and fertile land, where he settled with those who would follow him, and thus founded Amikwo village, which took its name from 'Ama-Ikwo di aku'. Eri, an Amaenyiana man, a palm wine tapper and the first to make it a profession settled in Awka in order to be near the numerous palm trees that were the sources of his palmwine production. He was later joined by his two friends, Ogbunu and Ogwa and their settlement was known as 'Eziagu' from which they derived the name 'Ezi-oka' as the name of the quarter where they settled. From Okpo of the Amachallas, Amikwo emigrated to where they now lived and from Amaenyi, the component parts of Ezioka also moved. Agulu came later to live with Amikwo, and Umudioka came to live among the Ezioka people. Okafor (1992) notes that Eri begat three sons who fromed the Umueri village of Awka. Ogwa, one of the sons of Eribegat three sons whose names were Eze, Obe and Ekweaneke. These sons had their own sons whose descendants became known as Umuogwu. Umuokpu, an offshoot of Umuoranma and part of the Ayom-na-Okpala communities went out to settle on the border with Nawfia town from Amaenyi, whilst the different people making up Ifite-Awka settled with the Okpos and Nkwelle people merged with Urueri.

Onuoha (2019), enumerate that Awka is made up of thirty-three villages which are grouped into two Ezi and Ifite sections and each section is divided into three and four quarters respectively. The two sections and their respective quarters are Ezi with Amikwo, Agulu and Ezioka quarters. The Ifite section are Ayom-na- Okpala, Amachalla, Nkwelle and Ifite-Oka quarters.

Cultism has become one of the commonest crimes many youths indulge themselves in with. The rate at which youths involve in cult activities nowadays is alarming, with eventful series of chaotic violence and destruction of lives and properties. Adewale (2005) capturing the widening scope of the menace of cultism and its accompanying inimical effects, assert that cultism with its attendant violence, torture, suppression and unwarranted intimidation

perpetrated by cult groups, has spread beyond the streets, institutions of higher learning to secondary schools, primary schools, residential areas and even market places. These groups often lure young individuals with promises of protection, power, and a sense of belonging. However, the reality is far from these promises, as cult membership often leads to involvement in criminal activities, violence, and a cycle of retaliation between rival groups. The resulting cult clashes have profound negative impacts on the community, instilling fear and disrupting the educational and social development of young people. Cultism is not a happy development. It is a canker worm in our national ethos. It is not only the church only but also of the society at large. Cultism in Awka is taking a serious toll on the society as it affects the social and moral standards of the people and increases the vices in society. It is an understatement to say that the environment devoid of peace cannot enhance meaningful development. Admittedly, the menace has attracted the concern of all stakeholders in the society as its increasing negative effects like destruction of lives and properties, cessation of academic activities, vandalism of school facilities, political thuggery, and economic implications and so on, have not derailed youths from joining cult groups. The threat to human lives and properties has escalated beyond mere imagination with the spate of violence of all forms including assassination, robbery, thuggery, theft, murder and burglary. Not just tertiary institutions in Awka, but the residential areas, offices and business areas have not been left out of this serious threat to the breakdown of law and order. This research therefore aims at ascertaining the roles of the Church in ameliorating the effects of cultism among youths Awka.

Historical Development of Cult Menace in Awka

Cultism is a monster that has eaten deep into our society with its ravaging effects. According to Oyegoke (2003), "It will amount to stating the obvious if cultism is said to be the mother of crimes in our society today" (p. 92). It is repeatedly said that the youths are the future leaders of our nation, but it is a little wonder what the future holds for the youths of this country which has a good proportion of them as secret cult members. The topic on cultism can never be over-emphasized, because it has degenerated so badly that they have become terror in communities as well.

The historical development of cultism in Awka can be traced to the major higher institution, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, in Awka axis. Ukandu (2011) observes that the educational system serves as the recruiting ground for cultism and her members turn to the larger society and wrath violence after graduation. Awka is the host community of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, commonly known as Unizik Azikiwe University. Nnamdi Azikiwe University came into being as an offshoot of the defunct Anambra State University of Technology (ASUTECH). ASUTECH which was established through law No.7 of 30 July 1980 by the

Government of the old Anambra State operated as a multi campus university, with campuses in Abakiliki, Enugu, Awka and Nnewi.

Cases of Cult Clash in Awka within the Year 2024

Cult-related killings have become alarmingly common in many villages within the Awka community, the capital of Anambra State. This pervasive violence has led many residents, especially the elites, to abandon their homes and seek refuge in hotels at night. Over the past five years, it has become a distressing norm to find dead bodies on the streets, often after violent exchanges between rival cult groups. In some instances, individuals returning to Awka from other states have been killed on the same night, targeted for previous conflicts traced back to rival cult groups waiting for revenge. Cultism has deeply infiltrated various segments of youth in Awka, extending beyond tertiary institutions to markets, secondary schools, and among tricycle operators. Areas frequently affected by these killings include Ifite, Okpuno, Dike Street near Eke Awka Main Market, Obinagu, Nkwelle, Ezinano, and UNIZIK Junction, among others.

On 31st March, 2024 being Easter Sunday, at least six youths were reportedly killed in Awka, the capital of Anambra State, during a clash between rival cult groups. This incident marked the first major outbreak of cult violence in the area after a significant period of calm due to police efforts and threats of arrests by state authorities. According to Eleke (2024), the violence began in the afternoon at the Eke Awka area and quickly escalated to other parts of the city. Some victims were felled at Okpuno, others near Dike Street close to Eke Awka market, and another fatal incident occurred in the Obinagu area. Eleke (2024) satiates that among the casualties was Mr. Nwofor, a staff member of the Anambra State Judiciary, who was reportedly conducting his normal business when he was caught in the crossfire. A video circulating on social media showed the aftermath of the clash, with two bodies lying on the ground. One victim was seen struggling in pain, lying in a pool of blood beside his motorcycle, while passersby hurriedly sought safety. Meanwhile, police in the state arrested a man in Awada, Idemili North Local Government Area, during the Easter holiday. The man was found carrying a bag containing an AK-47 rifle, believed to be procured by a cult group sponsor to confront rivals. Upon sighting the police, the man attempted to flee but was apprehended, and a search revealed the weapon with breech No. 25008266. This recent outbreak of violence underscores the persistent issue of cult clashes in Awka, despite previous efforts to curb such activities. The police continue to make strides in tackling the menace, evidenced by the arrest in Awada? But the situation remains volatile, requiring ongoing vigilance and intervention.

On another cult clash, according to Obianeri (2024), it was on Friday 10th April, that a yet-to-be-identified person was shot dead near UNIZIK Junction in Awka, Anambra State, by

members of a suspected rival cult group. The suspected cultists were said to have accosted the victim in a yellow tricycle before gunning him down. Obianeri (2024) notes that the incessant killings in Awka have been attributed to rivalry and supremacy battles among cult groups. The 12th of April incident brought the number of killings resulting from suspected cult clashes to over twelve~~12~~, a development that started on Easter Sunday. According to Obianeri (2024), who witnessed the Friday killing but did not want to be named for security reasons. He said that the man is a manager of Anambra Executive Transport Company. He was shot three times, and when the gunmen were sure he had died, they left the scene.

Furthermore, chaos erupted in the busy Aroma area of Awka when gunmen, suspected to be cultists, killed a young man in his 20s in broad daylight. According to Ujumadu (2024), this incident forced businesses to close abruptly, with people fleeing for safety. The victim, a tricycle revenue collector from Amudo Village, was trailed from Ifite and shot at close range at a popular bus stop. Hours later, another youth, part of a state taskforce on traffic enforcement, was also gunned down by suspected cultists in a speeding Siena bus.

Hon. Henry Mbachu, representing Awka 1 state constituency in the Anambra State House of Assembly, lamented that no fewer than 34 people had been killed in cult-related clashes in the past three weeks. He expressed concern that Awka, despite being the state capital and home to high-ranking officials and security agency heads, is becoming increasingly unsafe. In response to this crisis, Mbachu convened a summit, mobilizing Awka residents from across Nigeria. Major stakeholders, including Ozo title holders, village heads, women leaders, clergy, and politicians attended. Before the summit, he consulted with elders and stakeholders in major cities like Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu to garner support. Mbachu emphasized the need for collective action, stating that the situation appears to have overwhelmed everybody, but we cannot continue like this. We have to come together and fashion out a way forward (Ujumadu, 2024).

Reasons Why Youth Join Cult Groups

A list of factors are responsible for the attractiveness of cults to youths including: collapse of the family structure and good parental training; peer influence; a search for answers to felt needs (emotional, academic, financial etcetera); need for belongingness; inquisitiveness; lack of rigorous academic challenges or failure to measure up to these challenges in instances where they exist (that is substitution of efforts to succeed academically with participation in cult activities); and despair (for instance due to poverty and unemployment). These factors are enumerated as follows:

Protection Reason: The most common antic employed in luring ignorant youths is the protection fable. They make an ignorant youths believe that they can give their victim

absolute protection being the most powerful and strongest cult that nobody or cult group can cross their path without paying dearly for it. In order to seek power for protection from attack from rival cults, and intimidation from other youths, some youths join the secret cults. They see it as a way of getting rid of their timid members of secret cults, they are certainly free to command respect from fellow youths.

Influence of Peer Group: There is no doubt that peer group influence is a potent factor that compels young ones to join secret cults. There is no gainsaying that the period of adolescence is marked by intense social relationship in any environment he finds himself. At adolescent, there is a shift of emphasis on social relationship from the parents to the peer group. As adolescent breaks the total reliance and contact with his parents, he shifts same to the newly acquired group which in most cases is any group on campus he embraces.

Inferiority Complex: Youths who join cult groups for this reason make mistakes due to their perception that the cult organization is a place where they can find people who will readily accept them without regard to their social status. And not knowing that segregation exists in cult organizations. Some students join cults as a result of inferiority Complex. This is very common among youths from disorderly homes and poor families. They believe that becoming a cultist would forestall those who they assume to be superior to them from looking down on them.

Frustration/ Revenge Bid: A lot of youths and students join cult groups out of financial, academic, social and psychological frustration. These youths usually resort to drug taken as a way out after which becomes a cultist trooping for a miraculous solution. Also, youth join cult groups to carry out vengeance. This is because their unforgiving spirit, have taken the destructive decision of joining cults. This is as a result of either somebody who is higher in authority or status that has offended them or member of their family. Poor Parental Upbringing: Youths, who come from homes where codes of good conduct and discipline are strictly enforced, are proved to cultism. It will be observed that parental background, lack of moral instruction at home and the manner in which the child is brought up could be a factor in enrolment as a member of a cult. Excessive control by parents, too many rules could make individual tense and anxious while a child whose freedom knows no bound may be a ready candidate for cult membership. According to Mgbekem (2004), some parents love their children to the extent of pampering them. When they do a wrong thing instead of scolding them, they allow the children go free from the offence. They grow up with such negative habit and consequently imbibe criminally-oriented behavior which leads them to joining cult groups. There seem to be a strong link between weak and defective family background and influence and tendencies for individuals to join secret cults. In some cases, parents themselves might be members of secret cults.

Cult members may come from broken homes where child abuse and neglect are very rampant. Family breakdown has been identified as one of the causes of cultism on campuses. When a child comes from a broken home, he is exposed to parental negligence and frustration. Such child is easily induced into cultism. According to Ogunbameru (2004), Freud's frustration-aggression hypothesis stipulates that frustration leads to aggression either towards the perceived sources of interference or displaced to another object. Thus, individuals join cult to get over the frustration they encountered because of broken home.

Practical Steps of the Church in Addressing Incessant Cult Clash among Youths in Awka

In response to the ongoing challenge of youth cult clashes, the Church in Awka has implemented a range of proactive measures. These efforts encompass moral education, counseling, community outreach, collaboration with law enforcement agencies, support for victims' families, and spiritual guidance. Through these initiatives, the Church actively engages at-risk youths, offers alternatives to cult participation, and advocates for values that promote peace and unity. These efforts are discussed as follows:

Implementation of Christian Values as a Social Force

Religion provides moral codes which help to guide the social life of the people. Ukandu (2011) opts that:

The social context of religion is a theatre for positive powers of religion in the human societies. Efforts from religious agents are social reality with pragmatic effects that emanates from a genuine human response drawing inspiration from the divine. Religion in its essential nature is one of the most powerful and influential forces in organized human society. (p. 87).

To support this, Obilor (1998) opines that it is not possible for the human race to survive without the religious dimension as this will lead to anarchy and confusion in human relationship and societal cohesion. Religion provides morality on which the society imbibes for development and continuity without morality the growth and survival of the society may not be achieved. The religious sector owing to its large network and moral authority as well as a normative structure from which it operates is of enormous relevance for intervention in the cultism and other violent crimes challenges in Awka. Religion provides supernatural sanctions and groups in the society in form of social norms to control group behaviors. It could be said that social norms which unite the society are drawn from religion. Religion collaborates with other forces to ameliorate violent crimes such as cultism and so on. In support of this idea, Ezeme (2006) points that the church is neither police nor army, it can only boast of her moral force, the church does its work through teaching and mass mobilization. According to Adewale (1994) without true religious perception it will be

difficult to eradicate crime in any society therefore it could be logically stated that religiosity keeps individuals from engaging in criminal behavior. Crime is a moral problem and the change of heart a person undergoes in a religious conversion enables a person to build up a moral community which in turn influences people's behavior.

Church Community Development

Church is an agent of change; it makes efforts not only spiritually but also to transform the society to a better height. Community development is an organized effort to improve the conditions of community life and the capacity for the community integration and self-direction (Dunhan, 1970). Nmah (2012) points that the missionaries did not only bring the gospel of Jesus Christ; they established schools and taught the people and so on. The objectives of Church community development are according to Nmah (2012):

To encourage the spirit of communal self-help and initiative in the improvement.
To assist the communities in organizing themselves to embark on self-help projects.
To educate and stimulate individuals and groups to accept change for the improvement of their living standards. To encourage co-operation between communities, government and private sector in the improvement of the living conditions of communities. To enhance community integration and encourage the spirit of participation. To educate community members on the need for co-operation and to foster active participation in community affairs. (p. 21).

The church's partnership with all meaningful agencies and institutions of government at grass-root, national and international levels is factor of human development especially in the fight towards poverty eradication.

It has been observed that many youths due to unemployment and poverty have involved in violent crimes of which cultism is inclusive as a means to eke out a living. Therefore, the church should embark on infrastructural developmental projects in order to provide avenues for youths especially in Awka to earn a living. Establishment of infrastructural developmental projects in the society would not only improve the standard of living of people but would also generate employment in the society. The church involvement in establishing infrastructural developmental projects like industries, hospitals, schools, microfinance banks, children's home, guest houses, bakery among others would lead to employment of many youths into these establishments. Anozie (2013) observes that through this developmental establishments owned by the Church, workers who work in them are paid salaries; through this means, they earn their living. This will go a long way to reduce the problem of unemployment and poverty and keep the youths busy. As it is known that an idle mind is the devil's workshop, so when youths are meaningfully engaged it is probably that they would not engage in crime related activities.

Church Collaboration with law Enforcement Agencies in Fighting Cultism

It is the duty of law enforcement agents especially the police to fight crime in the society yet the church could collaborate with them to curb crime. The duty of Nigerian Police is to protect life and property yet, the police are not the only agent of policing in a society. According to Ukandu (2014), the involvement of religious organizations as structures of religion at the social plane is important in the curbing of crime owing largely to the level of passionate commitment with which they work that they are serving God. The alarming rate of cultism and other violent crimes occurrence in Awka points to the failure of intelligence gathering and absence of pre-emptive strategies for the police as a sali check this word and show where the quotation starts in the criminal justice system. Therefore, there is need for the church to help in the upgrading of the public perception of the police as Adebayo (2013) enunciates that the negative perception of the public hinders police efficacy. The positive perception of the public towards the police will highly yield public value as the required community supports that can account for the success of any police intervention in curbing crime especially the violent crime of cultism, from grass-root support and partnership. The church can serve as a resource to the community because of her institutional strength and grass-root relevance in creating a police-citizen partnership and watch. Ukandu (2011) views that:

The need for community involvement through the church and other religious agents is premised on the idea that the most strenuous efforts by the police alone will not produce the desired results if the community especially the religious community stands by passively in the erroneous belief those crimes and its violent expressions are solely the police responsibility. The way forward is community's acceptance and compliance to the challenges and task of crime prevention as a community collective responsibility as well as a police responsibility. (p. 97).

It could be said that church partnership with law enforcements agencies will help to curtail violent crimes in the society.

Effective and Genuine Religious Activities and Programmes

Moral religious activities and programmes have the tendency to control evil inclinations of people in the society. One of the evil inclinations is the desire to perpetrate violent crimes of which cultism is not excluded. Ukandu (2011) states that:

The involvement in religious activities will always have a positive effect on the level of youth criminality. That religion matters in crime control is a salience of religions participation on programmes and listening of teaching that tend to provide a more predictable behavior of its participants... thus, how young people spend their time is a major determinant of their involvement or otherwise in violent crime. (p. 94).

Church activities are packed with spiritual and moral contents aiming at reforming, regenerating and transforming the soul of man. Byron and Schroeder (2014) view that youth participating in religious activity help to steer them back to a course of less deviant behaviour and more important away from potential career criminal paths, Church programmes and consequent attendance by youths could insulate them from involving in cult related activities.

Conclusion

Joining cult group is like signing a death warrant or going on a suicide mission. Yet one wonders why youths who should be aiming to acquire various skills to become tomorrow's leaders are running into it especially young people in the communities. The church can be a key mediating institution for addressing violent crimes especially cultism as her wide spread presence and structures can be a resource when employed morally to intervene through detection, prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders and in the restoration of victims through effective religious programmes.

Recommendations

- i. The church should develop and implement comprehensive youth empowerment programs that focus on education, skill development, and entrepreneurship. These programs should aim to provide youths with viable economic opportunities, reducing the allure of cult membership as a means of financial and social gain. By offering workshops, vocational training, and small business grants, the church can help youths achieve their goals through legitimate means, thereby diminishing the socio-economic pressures that drive them towards cultism.
- ii. The church should actively engage with the broader community through regular outreach programs that promote unity, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Initiatives such as community dialogues, peace building workshops, and interfaith collaborations can help address underlying social conflicts and reduce tensions that contribute to cult clashes. Additionally, establishing partnerships with local schools, law enforcement, and community organizations can enhance the effectiveness of these outreach efforts and create a supportive network for at-risk youths.
- iii. Establishing robust mentorship and counseling services within the church can provide youths with the guidance and support they need to navigate the challenges of adolescence. Mentorship programs should connect youths with positive role models who can offer advice, support, and encouragement. Counseling services should be readily available to address issues such as trauma, peer pressure, and family

problems. By fostering emotional and psychological resilience, these services can help youths make better decisions and avoid the destructive path of cult involvement.

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