

CULTISM AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT OF PEOPLE IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

Cultism and cult rivalry have been ravaging several communities in Rivers State, leading to the victimization of several persons including police personnel, innocent civilians and cult members. The study examined the nexus between cultism and internal displacement of people in selected communities in Rivers State. In order to provide answer to the problem of study, two research questions were raised. Similarly, the research was anchored on the theory of national responsibility and anomie. The study adopted a qualitative research design and the content analysis method was used to analyse the secondary data obtained. The study found that cultism was a major cause of internal displacement of people in Rivers State. It concluded that the breakdown of norms that regulate people's behaviour, and the inability of the law enforcement agencies to proactively detect, arrest and prosecute gang members was responsible for the prevalence of cult violence in local communities in Rivers State. The study, therefore, recommended that the government should support the efforts of local vigilantes to combat cultism in rural areas. These local vigilantes should also act as informants to the police to identify both sponsors and perpetrators of cult violence. It also recommended a synergy between the government and non-governmental organizations in the rehabilitation of those affected by cult violence that may have sort shelters in other places outside their communities.

1.1 Introduction

Cultism and cult rivalry have ravaged many communities in Rivers State. Cultism, which was initially known to be activities that were limited to university campuses, has taken a dramatic toll on urban centers and local communities. Cultism has shifted from tertiary institutions to local communities (Wellington, 2016). In fact, many communities are currently experiencing war of supremacy among popular local cult groups such as Dee-bam, Deewell, and Icelanders. While cultism is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria, however its activities have ravaged several communities in Rivers State, where cult violence between rival cult groups have led to the killing of innocent community members and victimization of cult members. Although many communities in Rivers State have experienced cult violence, this situation is most acute in communities such as Ibaa and Ogbakiri in Emohua Local Government, Ahoada, and several communities in Khana Local Government Area. Recently, a Divisional

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Police Officer, DSP Bako, was murdered in Ahoada by a cult group who claimed to be Icelanders when the DPO and his team tried to rid the communities ~~in~~ of cult activities. Due to the threat of by cult violence to local communities, many inhabitants have been forced to relocate to urban centers or other nearby communities for refuge. It has been extremely difficult for law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend these cultists, as they threaten local residents and the community who reveal their identity (Chukwurah et al. 2022).

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), the largest database on internal displacement in the world, reports that “there were 50.8 million internally displaced people across the world at the end of 2019”. They further revealed that “45.7 million are displaced because of conflict and violence and 5.1 million are displaced as a result of disasters” (Ahire, 1993). These revelations lend credence to the number of people who are internally displaced on a global scale. Sadly, Nigeria has a sizeable number of these global statistics. In fact, there are 2.1 million internally displaced persons in Nigeria, which is the 10th largest number in the world.

Internal displacement disrupts the lives not only of the individuals and families concerned but also of the entire community and society. The areas left behind by the displaced and the areas to which they flee, suffer extensive damage. Socioeconomic systems and community structures often break down, impeding reconstruction and development for decades (Global Protection Cluster Working Group, 2007).

(Boyani, 2013) avers that, millions of IDPs worldwide live in dire conditions and often spend long years in protracted displacement. More often than not, they remain unprotected and are unable to assert their rights. National legislation often provides insufficient protection for the particular situation of the internally displaced. Specific legislation on internal displacement can thus be an essential cure. Therefore, national parliaments are crucial in protecting their internally displaced citizens through legislative action

The impact of internal displacement can therefore be equally devastating for states that may lack the capacity or institutional structures needed to protect and assist formerly self-sustaining populations. The areas to which IDPs relocate may be ill-prepared and under-resourced to cope with a sudden influx of people. Large-scale displacements can destabilize entire regions, posing severe security and humanitarian challenges.

IDPs have been compelled to leave their homes and often cannot return because they face risks at their places of origin from which State authorities are unable or unwilling to protect them, because they might have been specifically prohibited from returning, or because their homes have been destroyed or are being occupied by someone else. They may also face the risk of forced return to an unsafe area. In some cases, they may be compelled to seek shelter in crowded camps or settlements, which can result in various protection risks. They often lose access to their land and other property and are cut off from their normal livelihoods and sources of income. As a result, they may suffer poverty, marginalization, exploitation, and abuse (Boyani, 2013).

The problem of IDPs in Rivers State, particularly in the Khana Local Government Area, has been mainly due to cult activities and fight over territorial supremacy. According to Nelson Mandela “the youth are the leaders of tomorrow”. They are the backbone of any enduring society, and as such, they are saddled with many responsibilities. nature and nurture help prepare them for their future responsibility. As such, it is imperative that children grow up in the right environment devoid of deviant influences. The collective psyche of a child’s environment helps to fashion his/her behavior either negatively or positively. Psychological variables play a key role in determining the overall behavior of such a child. A popular aphorism says, ‘it takes a community to raise a child’. This means that the child’s immediate environment plays a pivotal role in determining his/her behavior. When negative aspects of youth’s behavior are not controlled, they become a burden, rather than a blessing to society. It is common knowledge that youths are inclined to indulge in deviant behavior that is considered morally and ethically unacceptable, abnormal, and antisocial. Such deviant behavior is not only harmful to those who

carry it out, but it is also harmful to the overall functioning of society. the above point shall become clear in subsequent sections, of this research work.

Rotimi (1993) states that “the leading contributing factors of youth deviant behavior include the media, influence of family life, widespread abuse of drugs and alcohol, easy access to weapons, and lack of strong punishment for juvenile offenders.”

Cultism seems to be the most profound deviant behavior. It has brought about all sorts of vices namely, armed robbery, rituals, killing, etc. While these are common among boys, they are also found among girls. In this connection, Uchenna (2014) argues that:

From the Anthropological/Sociological point of view, cult, in keeping with the common parlance, is a gender-specific (men only, or women only) or gender combination (unisex) association characterized by extremism, regimentation, secrecy, bizarre hazing rituals, argots, undue spirit of camaraderie at the expense of non-members, inclination to treat non-members and opposing cult members with deep contempt and terrible attacks, and subjection of members to a military-like drilling before, during, and after initiation. Fraternity, game, confraternity, family, system, brotherhood, culture, society, runs (current names for secret cult) or runs-man, game-man, rugged-man, system-man (current name for secret cult members), or whichever name secret cults and cultists have recently assumed in Nigeria, cultism is still a criminal subculture that deviates from the core values that guard mainstream society (p.172).

“Arguably, the secret cult is a major contemporary social problem plaguing the Nigerian educational system, and it has virtually permeated the entire structure of society. In our different schools, homes, places of work and worship, and neighborhoods, secret cults and cultists dominate” (Uchenna, 2014, p.172)

In the view of Igbinovia, Okonofua, Omoyibo, and Osunde (2003), most theories and explanations of deviant behavior look for its causes. They ask; why did the individual commit the deviant act and what can be done to prevent such actions in the future? They further maintain that; the answer may be found in the individual’s physique, body build, chemical imbalance, hormones, or chromozones; it may be found in the environment; or it may be the result of some type of social process.

As a result of the above, this work seeks to analyze how cult violence occasions internally displaced persons and the mechanisms for their reintegration.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many studies have attempted to examine the pitfalls of cult violence (Nwaogwugwu and Ngwor, 2017; Titilope, Zakuan and Osman, 2017; Ola and Adesola, 2015), but little or no attention has been paid to the reintegration of the affected population. Similarly, the Federal government and Rivers State government amnesty programs for the reintegration and rehabilitation of ex-militants were also targeted at ex-militants, ex-cultists and their commanders, while little attention was paid to the re-integration of civilian populations. This study investigates the relationship between cult violence and the reintegration of civilian populations rather than ex-combatants or cultists. Another limitation of previous studies is that they focused on violent conflicts such as civil wars and insurrections as a cause of internal displacement, but little attention was paid to gang or cult violence as a trigger of internal displacement.

Youth cultism pervades the entire spectrum of Nigerian society. When one traces that vast arc across space and time, one would discover how such creeds have traveled with negative consequences, especially among the youth. Perhaps, in Nigeria, the early stages of development of cultism had positive goals, but apparently goal has been long forgotten. Thus, the whole idea has been turned over its head. Sadly, it is these negative aspects that are celebrated among youths, with all elements of negativity associated with it. When Wole Soyinka and his colleagues introduced cultism in Nigerian universities, the goal was to bring together intellectuals of like minds

to solve common problems. Unfortunately, that lofty ideal has lost its purpose and is now associated with criminality and vice (Ola and Adesola, 2015).

Cultism, in whatever form it presents itself, tends to influence the minds of youths who blindly line into the doctrines that such creed preaches. More often than not, it creates a pernicious form of thinking that creates a sort of group think mob mentality. Painfully, these activities are justified by those who practice them.

Cultism in whatever form it manifests tends to carry many negative consequences and thus affects members without them being conscious of such effects. For one, they are turned into criminals. This is because some people are forced to perform all sorts of deviant behaviors as part of the initiation ceremony. Some see it as a way of life; hence, they terrorize and create havoc in their immediate environment. Second, members of a particular cult group see other members as enemies and clash on a regular basis. Usually, such conflicts among members of different cult groups result in death and sometimes injuries. Often times, there are reports of beheadings accompanied by revenge by members of the affected cult group. Even among members of the same cult group, there is a lot of infighting.

Cult violence in the Khana Local Government Area seems to affect the livelihood of the people living in the area. In this connection, Amnesty International (2020) contends that, the failure of authorities to protect people from attacks and intimidation by violent gangs is leading to the loss of lives and rising impunity that is making life precarious in some communities across Rivers State. Amnesty International (2020) further added that “at least 60 people were killed in 2019 alone in various communities of Rivers state, especially in the; Khana and Gokana local government areas”. With respect to the Khana Local Government Area, which is our mean focus, Amnesty International (2020) alleged that “at least 49 people have been killed in different communities in the Khana local government area in a series of attacks between April and September 2019, according to villagers and community leaders”.

Incessant cult violence has led to forced displacement of residents in the Emouha~~Emouha~~, Ahoada, and Khana Local Government Areas of Rivers State. In an interview with the Guardian newspaper, the Chairman of Khana Local Council, Mr. Lahteh Loolo, said “cultists had displaced some communities in the area” (Ebiri and Godwin, 2019). Similarly, Obe (2019) avers that “entire communities have been evacuated and thousands of Ogoni people relocated to nearby communities where they had become one form of economic refugee or the other. Farming, which was the mainstay of the local economy has suffered greatly”. This situation is also experienced by residents of communities such as Ibaa and Ogbakiri in Emouha LGA and Ahoada East, where cult violence has forced community residents to move to neighboring communities.

Given the issues of internal displacement pointed out above, what efforts have the government made in all three local government areas in terms of reintegration of displaced persons in their various local government areas? The primary responsibility for protecting internally displaced persons, and all persons within their own country, rests with the national authorities of the country. National responsibility is a core concept in any response to internal displacement. It is a fundamental operating principle of the international community and is routinely emphasized by governments as a function of their sovereignty. Yet, sometimes the very governments responsible for protecting and assisting their internally displaced populations are unable or even unwilling to do so, and might even be directly involved in forcibly uprooting civilians (Global Protection Cluster Working Group, 2007).

Given the enormity of these challenges, the reintegration of returnees must be treated as an integral element of the broader process of peacebuilding. Likewise, an effective process of peacebuilding will be the sine qua non for the effective establishment of national protection. To meet these challenges, multilateral activities should be based on two main building blocks: reconstruction~~;~~ and reconciliation.

The first paragraph of this research indicates that, on a global scale, millions of people are displaced due to conflict and violence. In this connection, this study seeks to analyze how cult violence has occasioned the internal displacement of persons in selected communities in Rivers State.

1.3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to examine cult violence and internal displacement of persons in selected communities in Rivers State. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- Determine the causes of cult violence in communities in Emouha, Ahoada, and Khan LGAs in Rivers State.
- To ascertain whether cult violence leads to internal displacement of people in the affected LGAs.

2.0 Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Cult activities in the Emuoha~~Emuoha~~, Ahoada, and Khana LGAs in Rivers can be discussed under two theoretical frameworks. The first is the framework for national responsibility, and the second is the theory of anomie.

Framework for national responsibility

This framework was instituted by the Brookings-Bern Project in 2005. It states that national responsibility is fundamental to ensuring an effective approach to internal displacement. The simple fact that IDPs remain within the borders of their country means that their own state bears primary responsibility for protecting and assisting them and for safeguarding them against arbitrary displacement in the first place. This principle is affirmed in international standards, namely the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and is regularly restated by both the international community and individual states. Although there exists a broad consensus on the normative principle of national responsibility, realizing it often proves challenging in practice.

Because internally displaced persons (IDPs) reside within the borders of their own countries and are under the jurisdiction of their governments, the primary responsibility for meeting their protection and assistance needs rests with their national authorities. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement underscore this point by setting forth the rights of IDPs and the obligations of governments toward these populations. They provide a framework for better understanding what national responsibility should entail (Brooking Institution, 2005).

As reflected in Principle 3 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, national authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to protect and assist IDPs living within their borders. The Guiding Principles themselves set forth the rights of IDPs and the obligations of governments toward these populations. To provide more specific guidance to governments about how to exercise their national responsibility for IDP protection and assistance (Salama, Spiegel and Brennan, 2001)

In 2005, the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement developed the document Addressing Internal Displacement: A Framework for National Responsibility (hereafter “Framework” or “Framework for National Responsibility”). The Framework sets out twelve broad areas in which states can directly contribute to the mitigation and resolution of internal displacement. 1). Prevent displacement and minimize its adverse effects; 2). Raise national awareness of the problem. 3) Collect data on the number and conditions of IDPs. 4). Support training on the rights of IDPs. 5) Create a legal framework for upholding the rights of IDPs. 6). Develop a national policy on internal displacement. 7). Designate an institutional focal point on IDPs. 8) Support national human rights institutions to integrate internal displacement into their work. 9) Ensure the participation of IDPs in decision making. 10). Support durable solutions; 11). Allocate adequate resources to the problem. 12) Cooperate with the international community when national capacity is insufficient.

This is not an exhaustive list of the measures expected of governments but rather a list of 12 minimum steps that governments can take to translate their responsibilities into concrete actions. Taken together, these steps seek to guide governments through specific suggestions on actions to take. Further guidance is given on how to

implement each of the twelve benchmarks by outlining certain essential elements (for example, that data collection on IDPs should encompass all categories of IDPs, should be disaggregated and should protect privacy) as well as by suggesting different practical ways of achieving each objective (Miller, 2001).

Since the publication of the Framework, national authorities, regional intergovernmental organizations, international experts on internal displacement, UN human rights, humanitarian and development agencies, NGOs, IDP associations, and academics have used it in several different ways, including as a tool for advocacy, awareness-raising, monitoring national responses to internal displacement, training of government officials, and providing technical assistance for the development of national legislation and policies to address internal displacement. International organizations and local NGOs have translated the Framework from English into eleven additional languages: Arabic, Azerbaijani, Chinese, French, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Sinhala, Spanish, Tamil, and Thai.

Anomie Theory

According to Igbinovia, Okonofua, Omoyibo, and Osunde (2003, p.142). “Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, introduced the concept of anomie in his book ‘The division of Labor in Society’, published in 189. He used anomie as a condition of deregulation that was occurring in society. this meant that rules on how people ought to behave with each other and thus people did not know what to expect from one another” “Anomie, simply defined, is a state where norms (expectations on behaviors) are confused, unclear, or not present. It is normless, Durkheim felt, that led to deviant behavior.” Igbinovia, Okonofua, Omoyibo, and Osunde (2003, p.112) They further contend that;

Robert K. Merton, an American sociologist, borrowed Durkheim’s concept of anomie to form his own theory, called strain theory. It differs somewhat from Durkheim’s in that Merton argued that the real problem is not created by a sudden social change, as Durkheim proposed, but rather by a social structure that holds out the same goals to all its members without giving them equal means to achieve them. It is this lack of integration between what the culture calls for and what the structure permits that causes deviant behavior. Deviance is a symptom of the social structure (pp.113-114).

In brief, this theory avers that when social regulations are weak or broken, the controlling influence of society on the individual to conform to rules and regulations is no more effective. The result of the above state of affairs is a quite obvious breakdown of law and order. Above all, each act as he or she sees fit, and the life of man, as Thomas Hobbes puts it, becomes; “poor, nasty, solitary brutish and short.” This means that when existing social structures fail to function properly, all sorts of deviancy follow. Drawing from the theory of framework for national responsibility, it means that both the federal and state governments of Nigeria are under a duty to act whenever there are cases of cult violence, especially those that lead to internal displacement of community residents. In addition, Robert Merton’s anomie theory is apt because it explains the driving force behind cultism as a breakdown of the norms that regulate people’s behavior in society.

2.2 Conceptual Review of the Literature

2.2.1 Concept of Cultism

Azoba (1999) defines cults as “groups or organizations characterized by the use of secret initiations or other rituals, oaths, grips (or hand-claps) or signs of recognition between members, stating that the existence, motives, membership, activities, plans and rituals of such societies are usually kept secret and not revealed to non-members”. To some observers, however, a distinction needs to be made between fraternity, confraternity, and cult, given that these concepts (to them) are not the same. Fraternity is a “social organization of male college students while confraternity is an association of persons unified in a common purpose or profession, and cult is a

system or community of religious worship or rituals generally considered to be extremist and bogus” (This Day, 11 October, 1997, P. 28 cited in Palu, 1999, p. 151).

“A cult may be defined as a group of people who follow a system of worship that is different from the usual and established forms of religion. Cult could also be defined as a specific system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and deity. Cultism, therefore, is an exclusive ideology and a system of practice centered on sacred symbols that are shrouded in a-mystery and beyond the knowledge and understanding of ordinary people. In other words, cultism is a system of devotion or worship as-expressed in rituals. The object of worship in this sense is ideological (Erickson, 1968).

According to Fadipe (1970) “a secret cult is defined to mean any form of organization whose activities are not only exclusively kept away from the knowledge of others but such activities are carried out at odd hours of the day and they often clash with the accepted norms and values of everyday life.”

The main impetus for cult activities is best linked with the objective needs of such groups in an increasingly complex society. First, all secret cults endeavor to protect their members from harm inflicted by non-members. This protection is usually achieved through the influence of members who are placed in privileged positions. Second, secret cults provide security for members in political, economic, and even religious spheres. Third, members of secret cults usually strive to gain a psychological advantage over the rest of the population. They deliberately create the impression that they possess esoteric knowledge.

Secret cults are enclosed organized associations of groups devoted to the same cause. They have sacred ideology, symbols, and a series of rites. Cultism is an organization whose activities are kept away from the knowledge of others.” He says “cultism is a secretive organization whose activities are not open to the public.” Uweru (2010) contends that “secret cult is a set of practices, belief systems, or ideas whose essence is known only to the inner members and excessively admired and defended even to the point of laying down one’s life.” Uweru also defines a cult as a group of people who share and propagate the same belief system. He maintains that “secret cults keep very rigid and strict rules. Any member who breaks any of the laid down rules is severely punished.” Fadipe asserts that “a cult is a religious group which differs significantly in some respect from those religious groups which are the normative expression of religion in our total culture.”

Gboyega (2005) contends that “secret societies or cults are characterized by initiation, which is compulsory for all members before the individuals are allowed or permitted to know some of the secrets of the organization.

2.2.3 Internally Displaced Persons

Internally Displaced Persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular because of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement; Kampala Convention, Article 1(k).

Involuntary departure and the fact that the individual remains within his/her country are the two defining elements of an internally displaced person (IDP). The first element distinguishes IDPs from individuals who left their homes out of choice and could have otherwise safely remained where they lived. The second element explains why IDPs are not refugees. Refugees, by definition, are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence. In other respects, however, both categories of displaced persons often face similar risks and deprivations. The definition mentions some of the main causes of internal displacement, including armed conflict, violence, violations of human rights, and disasters (Ozesua, 2016).

Population displacement expresses a social relationship in which a group loses control over the resources of society and the physical protection of its members. It manifests the inability of a social group to realize its

interests, especially the basic needs of its members, in relation to other groups. Any social group that is consistently unable to attain such needs, usually because it is socially disadvantaged, is displaced. There is a strong tendency for such a group to move either en masse, in small groups, or as individuals. Although such a group is prone to migration, relocation is only an "extreme" manifestation of the long process of displacement. Other manifestations of displacement include starvation, mass suicide, identity crisis, and vagrancy. Indeed, displacement begins long before relocation can take place, if it occurs at all (Uweru, 2010).

A central issue in population displacement is that of group security: security of livelihoods, food security, identity security, environmental security, and, above all, physical security. Second, conflict is a principal factor in understanding displacement. The contradictions inherent in populations mean that social antagonisms would erupt from time to time into violence, and other forms of social unrest. When this occurs, relocation inevitably becomes an option. Finally, population displacement is a problem created by a particular state. In all modern societies, the state mediates social antagonisms. Its role is always to keep such antagonisms from exploding into open conflicts and physical violence. To achieve this, the state must always rise above the interests of social groups, forging consensus and acting as a guarantor of the security of every group within its jurisdiction. By so doing, the state appears as an impartial arbiter, representing the collective and corporate interests of all groups within the nation. Population displacement is most likely to occur in situations where the state is unable to perform these functions (Daminabo, 1991).

3.0 Methodology

The study relied on secondary sources of data, particularly those obtained from books, academic journals, and internet sources, while content analysis was used to analyze the secondary data obtained.

4.0 Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Our analysis shows that the major cause of cult violence in local communities in Ahoada, Emuoha, and Khana Local Government Areas was the fight for supremacy and territorial control by rival cult groups such as Deebam, Dee-well, and Iceland. The study also found that cult violence was a major cause of internal displacement of community members in Ibaa, Rumuodogo, and Ogbakiri in Emuoha LGA, and Ahoada, and Khana LGAs. It found that while various communities in the 23 local government areas of Rivers State have experienced different forms of cult violence, that of communities in Khana, Ahoada, Emouha, and Egbema seems to have had the greatest impact on community residents, as many have been forced out of their homes to neighbouring communities or urban centers to live in make-shift houses or slumps due to their inability to afford the high cost of rent in cities.

The study concludes that the breakdown of norms that regulate people's behavior and the inability of law enforcement agencies to proactively respond to cases of cult violence and killings were responsible for the increasing cases of cultism in local communities. Therefore, the study recommended that the government should support local vigilantes to help combat cultism in rural areas. These local vigilantes should also act as informants to the police to identify both sponsors and perpetrators of cult violence. It also recommended a synergy between the government and non-governmental organizations in the rehabilitation of those affected by cult war who may have shelters in other places outside their communities.

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