Killer Cults on Campus: Secrets, Security and Services Among Nigerian Students[1]

By Irit Eguavoen

I. Introduction

Even though Nigeria has faced student violence for decades, secret campus cults have not yet drawn much international attention in comparison to Nigerian vigilantes (Pratten 2008b). *"[W]hen cult violence erupts [...] they are attended by substance abuse, rape, physical injuries, destruction of properties, chaos, psychological trauma and even, death"* (Aina et al. 2003: 1). Campus cultism is considered *"the plunder of the nation"*, which creeps from the *"ivory towers of violence"* to other spheres of society driven by *"Satan's angels of terror in the valley of the shadow of death"*.[2] This flowery media rhetoric hints at the popular representation of students' cults, for which evil and the occult, as well as the connotation of secrecy, play a crucial role. This article shows how secret campus cults are presented in public and academic discourse, and discusses them in the context of Nigerian youth violence. Campus cults are twilight institutions (Lund 2007), which provide security on campus, but at the same time contribute to insecurity by stoking anxieties. This ambiguity complicates the eradication of cult-related violence.

Secret campus cults are also referred to as brotherhoods or confraternities (*confras*) to point out the connotation of social cohesion. There are numerous names for the same group and journalists and university authorities counted about forty antagonized campus cults (Ogunsanya 2000).

Students are recruited as members, but university staff may maintain patron relationships to the groups. Campus cults are gender-speci-

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[2] Nigerian Tribune 04. 04. 1996, The PUNCH 12. 09. 1997, Newswatch 19. 07. 1999, This Day 02. 01. 2002.

fic with male cults the more relevant to the issue. Cult membership of a male student in the researched universities seemed the norm in 2000, whereas female cults the exception. Usually, about five different cults operate on a campus, with larger organizations maintaining networks which link national head offices to local sub-units all over the country.

In Southern Nigeria, the word 'cult' describes religious, spiritual groups as well as conspiracy. The term 'cultism' refers to opaque social networks, such as sodalities. 'Secret cults' and 'secret societies' are used synonymously, as are the terms 'campus confraternities' and 'campus cults', although the latter carries a stronger connotation of perpetrating violence.

In 1979, the Nigerian government prohibited the membership of civil servants in secret societies in the national constitution (Section 35 / 4). Some sodalities were categorized as cultural associations and excluded from the ban, but since then campus cults have been illegal. The Nigerian government reconfirmed the illegal status of campus cults in 1989, when it passed Decree 47. In 2000, Edo State provided a Secret Cult Prohibition Bill prescribing 21 years of imprisonment for cult members in public or educational services. The laws have no considerable impact; they were even hotly debated to be contra-productive because they cut the sanction capability of the university authorities (Ojo 1995, Ogunsanya 2000). Instead of being pushed back by law, violent cultism seems to gain a foothold in other urban spaces and secondary schools.

In 2000, field research on campus was strongly constrained by security concerns. Therefore, interview partners were recruited via a snowball method starting with students from a particular neighborhood in Benin City / Edo State, and then extended to Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma and Uniben (University of Benin, Benin City). Interviews presented here focus on these two universities. The data was supplemented by campus visits, informal conversations, archival research, and the review of literature as well as internet sources.

II. Secrets, Security and Services

Members of the same cult do not necessarily share a common ethnic, social or religious background; neither the academic subject is relevant. But membership is not coincidental. Students may seek membership, but usually, the organizations screen *Jambites* (first semester students, called after the university entrance examination JAMB) for candidates. The priority given to selection criteria, such as money, physical strength, intellectual capacities, gentleness, shyness, loyalty or

courage, may differ from group to group. Existing social relationships to members of the cult are taken into account because influential families may back up their own children against the police and other state authorities. By joining the same group, students can keep up social networks, which are endangered when joining antagonized organizations. Poor students and young men with low academic achievement, who aimed at rent-seeking and examination malpractices, are attracted by the cults. But young men from wealthy families are predestined for membership (Aina et al. 2003). Their parents are often suspected to be members of secret societies (Offiong 2003). Benin City hosts a large number of adult shrine cults, which are not criminalized, but are demonized as the campus cults (Gore and Pratten 2003). The eldest son will be initiated in his parents' cult, while younger siblings join the campus cults. Students argued that membership in a secret cult often acts as a precondition to access elite positions in society. This argument is frequently quoted in the literature (Aina et al. 2003) *"It is the prevalent impression* [in contemporary Nigeria] *that if one does not belong to any secret society, that one could not make it in life. This idea is extended to all spheres of human endeavor, be it judicial, political, social, civil service or even academics 'in order to make it in life' after their education"*(Fawole 1997). According to students, some job interviewers utilize codes to detect common campus cult networks (Eguavoen 2003).

Interview partners in Benin City distinguish between cultists and *Jews* who are not initiated into a campus cult.[3] The screening starts when new *Jambites* arrive on campus. Older students canvass in a way that makes the candidates unaware of what is going on. The canvassers are often familiar to the *Jambites* as older relatives or neighbours. Time spent at the same high school may serve as a starting point for social interaction and friendship (Owoeye 1997). From the perspective of the *Jambites,* the canvassers appear as companions, who assist them in finding their way on campus.

"So like the first thing I moved into [. . .] *we were all boys. Most nights they don't stay at home.* [. . .] *They ask you if you want to come.* [. . .] *You have to go in pairs, drink, girls are there* [. . .] *Then somebody talks to you, nobody oppresses you* [. . .] *Maybe when you are not financially okay, they lend you a helping hand, see, and they make you know that: Look all these incentives come from people who make sacrifices for you to be well cared for. So you have to belong to* [a] *brotherhood if*

[3] 'Jew' had a clear negative connotation, as other terms used for non-initiated. There was, however, no religious or anti-Semitic reference attached to it.

you want those kind of good things to continue. [...] *they tend to get close to you, tell you: Okay that look, that they are a kind of ensured, they can do anything on campus and walk away with it.* [...] *If you want to be like them, you know, to be above the law, it means also a* [member of a hit] *squad cannot longer talk to you. No lecturer can oppress you* [...] *They tell you all these offers. Look, there is money involved. You are free. We take care of your exams for you and so on."*[4]

Candidates are lulled with such promises, and many *Jambites* comply at this point in time. Hesitating *Jambites* are continuously confronted with the fact that they are already indebted to a particular organization. Canvassers threaten them by destroying their property or applying physical violence. Most candidates, however, comply sooner or later by telling themselves *"If you can't beat them, join them"*. Interview partners stressed that only a minority of male students are able to upkeep their non-member status by displaying extraordinary engagement in a rather strict religious community on campus ('preaching the Bible'). Such persons are considered unfit candidates due to their rejection of alcohol, pre-marital sex and charms. *Jambites* who resist initiation may face fewer problems than cultists who enjoy the protection of their own organization, but automatically become targets for rival cults. Being cultist or a *Jew* is the outcome of the screening process rather than one of individual choice. Highly attractive candidates who refuse joining the organizations are initiated by applying tricks, and candidates may be snatched away by a rival organization: *"once* [...] *two organizations were canvassing one guy.* [...] *But somehow, before they could pick him* [for the initiation] *others came to pick him. He was thinking it was the same group he was going to join.* [...] *He found out when he was initiated and the other people* [the cult he wanted to join] *raised an eyebrow that he blackmailed them, that he didn't keep his promise."*[5]

Forced initiations are possible because initiations take place in a sphere of secrecy. Interview partners were very frightened because they didn't know which organizations were pursuing them. Some experienced pressure from different campus cults and finally joined in order to gain protection from one party. There are many reports of surprise initiations which a *Jambite* cannot elude because a candidate then shares exclusive knowledge which binds him to the organization. The cult will not let him go. If he escapes, cultists will continue to threat him until he complies or leaves campus. Knowledge about the initiation is kept secret, but members have some general idea of what is hap-

[4] Black Axe member, 23. 10. 2000.

[5] Eiye member, 23. 10. 2000.

pening at initiations of rival groups. The initiations usually include trials of courage, infliction of pain as well as some ceremonial part, which may be accompanied by the allocation of code names or regalia.

After a successful initiation, a new member undergoes training, gets introduced to other members, and learns about his cult as well as about the rivals. Promotion within the organization entails more access to information and money. Campus cults are organized into local segments, as well as into hierarchical grades and task units, such as hit squads for violent operations. But most members remain at the lowest level, meaning they pay membership fees, which are paid to the canvasser according to the economic status of the member and this money is then reallocated within the organization. Members do not necessarily identify with the group, nor make use of the opportunities offered by the organization. Due to the lack of exit options, however, paying fees and maintaining discretion about a group can be a useful strategy in coping with undesired membership. A low level member has limited access to knowledge yet, in case he requires specific services, he approaches the canvasser or the leader of his local segment. This service, however, is hardly for free since the service of the contact person has to be accomodated financially.

Besides logistical support, members do possess some sanctioning ability in case they feel unfairly treated by lecturers or students. Humiliation is a typical situation. Also female non-members may employ campus cults for such services. The organization steps in when a member requests help or if other members act as promoters of conflict.

Interview partners explained that most of the conflicts are about girls. In case a female student refuses the request for a relationship, it may happen that "[the cultist] *will go and meet your boyfriend and say: Leave that girl alone. She's now mine. If your boyfriend is nobody* [a non-initiated]*, he is in trouble.* [. . .] *If the guy is in a higher cult he backs off, but if he feels his cult is superior to the other cult he warns him and before you know it trouble has started.* [Q: Doesn't the girl have anything to say?] *when they* [the group of disturbing guy] *are able to send your boyfriend packing, he backs off and you are exposed. They can frustrate you* [the girl] *and do a lot of things to you. Come around, threaten you.* [. . .] *But the alternative, you would go to a rival cult, maybe a stronger cult and you can pay them for their services and say: Somebody is intimidating me. Go and deal with the person.* [. . .] *If you no longer see the* [disturbing] *boy your money has* [done the job]."[6]

Conflicts among students occur during examinations or day-to-day interaction. Incidences of humiliation and defeat are recalled in the col-

[6] Non-initiated graduate from Ekpoma, 23. 10. 2000.

lective memory of the cults and the next opportunity is used to hit back at the rival organization. With time, the justification for violence gets blurred because the circle of revenge and counter-revenge becomes disconnected from factual events. For outsiders, it seems out of reason why students start kidnapping and killing each other for banalities and petty arguments, but each *confra* war is the outcome of many preceding incidences. A conflict of two individuals is up-scaled to a conflict between two organizations; this then becomes a fight, and finally escalates in a *confra* war. Campus cults act as catalysts by stirring conflicts, promoting violent conflict settlements, making reference to a system of dignity, and by providing arms and combatants. The paradox is striking because campus cults claim to settle conflicts which are caused by and escalated due to their existence. The ambiguous status of conflict settler and violence perpetrator allows the organizations to regulate security on campus. Consequently, the demand for their services persists and financial resources may be extorted from students.

Law in this context refers to the law declared by the campus cults. The individual member of the stronger campus cult can never be at fault. His interest is seen as legitimate by his fellow members and worth defending. Of course, this causes conflict with other systems of law. State law, for example, seems not to be applicable to cult members; cultists seem to elude the national juridical and executive system grace to their social, patrimonial networks. *"Secret Cults are standing above the law. They are the law on campus"; "The cause of violence on campus is: no matter what they* [the cultists] *do, they are walking away with it."*[7] Even though this seems like a general observation, it is not always true; particular university authorities took effective action against members of campus cults (Ogunsanya 2000).

Besides the regulatory function, the campus cults provide the framework for social interaction. Often, members of the same cult share accommodation, which allows for fast exchange of information, meetings and mutual support. Joint accommodation is also more secure for there are always sufficient people around in case an antagonized cult attacks a person. The leaders of the cult live among their members in such 'fortified areas'. Because canvassers organize the accommodation, the candidate almost automatically gets a place hosting his later cult fellows.

Cult membership is also of relevance in the home towns of members. In such a setting, members of the same cult are integrated into local networks of friendship. Some organizations also maintain formal local groups outside campus. Cult members tend to spend leisure together, support each other and participate in other members' social lives by

[7] Frequent quotation, 2000; female scholar, 2000.

attending family events, such as funerals or weddings. In the hometown setting, the relationship between members of rival cults is characterized by less tension. The cult membership of the children may be uncovered by the family. One reason is the association of an evil, criminal image of cultists with asocial and dangerous behaviour, such as drug consumption. Other aspects, such as the entrenchment in a supportive reciprocal network, are not acknowledged in public discourse or the popular media, and are therefore rather interpreted as friendships.

III. Heroes, Hijackers and Histories

There are a variety of competing histories, each of which are characterized by image struggles. The history was delivered as oral tradition among students and picked up by journalists, whose articles help turn it in a popular historiography. Students often enjoy talking about the origin of campus cultism, irrespective to their membership status. Some elements were common knowledge and part of all narratives, such as the year of foundation, 1952, or that the University of Ibadan is the cradle of the first campus cult called the Pyrate Confraternity, as well as stories of its most popular founding member, the Nobel laureate of literature Prof. Wole Soyinka. Furthermore, all narrators stressed that the confraternity was meant to oppose European values and colonial attitudes, which dominated academic life in Ibadan at this time. Pyrates are recalled as stemming from wealthy families who pursued idle aims, but applied peaceful means in fighting against students' oppression. This mythical narration is always followed by statements stressing the degradation of this ideal, which culminated in a complaint of moral decline, such as *"They* [later and today's cultists] *don't know what true cultism is about."* The admiration for cultism and the condemnation of cultists as criminals is a paradox that draws through the entire discourse of campus cultism in Nigeria.

Cults teach their members about the history of their organization and such histories seem to be campus specific. Cult histories and the popular history also tend to merge to a large extent. As a researcher, it was striking to learn that especially high ranking cultists expressed great admiration for the pacifist activities of the 1950s' Pyrates. This frequent reference stood in clear contrast to the violent operations of their organizations. For non-violent cultists, the reference to the original Pyrates served as justification for membership and supported the personal identification with cultism. As a result, members also distinguished the good cultist from the bad (violent, hit squad) cultist. If membership became public, many families were convinced that their

son was a good cultist, who was victimized by law, or his peer group. Thus, the reaction was often protectionist.

An ironic dimension of this history is that the heroic Pyrates spoken of are unhappy about the proud references made to them. The authorized historiography of the Pyrate Confraternity talks of the foundation at the College of Ibadan in 1952, where students of the college formed the 'Original Seven'. Two founding members, Wole Soyinka and Olumuyiwa Awe, remembered publicly the two central objectives of the confraternity: fighting tribalism and elitarism. From their eye witness accounts, it is clear that it was neither a spiritual organization nor a secret society (Adeola 1997, This Day 02. 01. 2002). The organization grew fast. While only 140 Pyrates joined by 1973, in 1978, 22,000 students were organized in eighteen local segments and led by a Supreme Pyrates Council whose chairman was 'Capt'n Blood', an alias used by Soyinka.

Source: NAS homepage

Figure 1: The Original Seven Pyrates

As a group, the original Pyrates distanced itself from the emerging violence on campus in the late 1970s and was registered with the Nigerian Ministry of Internal Affairs under the name National Association of Seadogs (NAS) in 1980. An official ban of all campus activities followed in July 1984 to underline the distance between the legalized Pyrates Confraternity and its illegal namesake, which continued to engage in violent operations on campus. The existence of campus Pyrates is officially denied by NAS. The organization consequently but unsuccessfully, refuses public ascription as the first campus cult. Soyinka was urged on several public occasions to give official statements on campus cultism. He denied any NAS responsibility for current violent outbreaks. The former chairman of the Pyrates, Ben Oguntuase, nar-

rates a story of people, who were hijacking the original Pyrates. This provoked Awe, one of the 'Original Seven', who withdrew from NAS and became a Born-Again-Christian, to ask publicly: *"By whom"* (This Day 02. 01. 2002)?

Doubts persist as to whether there is a hidden connection between NAS and the campus Pyrates, as the two histories stand side by side. Even though NAS can refer to historical documents which suggest that campus cultism evolved not earlier than in the 1970s, popular history traces violent cultism back to the early 1950s thus assuming a continuous connection between the legal and the illegal organization. NAS displays an ambivalent attitude by negating linkages, but involves itself in anti-cultist campaigns including the paternal advice for the campus cults to follow the NAS example of formal registration and withdrawal from campus. This attitude gives the impression that the core idea of the organizations is the same. This way, NAS contributes to an overall positive image of cultism. But it is, of course, mainly the pressure by the media, which continuously urges NAS to act the interface of campus cults. The media never gets tired of retelling the story of the Nobel laureate with the pirate's patch. The fascination seems to originate in the luring link of the extremes it suggests – images of violent students on one hand, versus one of the leading Nigerian intellectuals, on the other.

Similarities between NAS and the campus Pyrates support the argument of ideological linkage. Membership is multi-ethnic, not a self-evident fact considering the increasing ethnization of off-campus youth movements. Ethnic diversity and student migration enable the groups to keep nationwide networks. Even though campus cults do not state to fight elitism, there is a strong belief that everyone can make it in life via the internal cult network, and the idea of equality of opportunity supported by social networks and patronage is very prevalent. NAS members are known to hold high ranking appointments in society.

The ambivalent NAS policy seems to act as a blueprint for historiographies of other organizations, such as the Neo Black Movement of Africa (NBM). According to history, the NBM was founded in 1976/1977 at Uniben in the course of the Festival of Black Arts and Culture held in Lagos, the revolt against President Murtala Mohammed and the Ali-Must-Go protests.[8] Benin City is considered 'the cradle of cam-

[8] In 1978, students in Lagos protested against the increase of hostel and feeding fees. The off campus demonstration was turned down by the police and five students shot, which entailed a debate on the use of arms in dealing with student riots (Ojo 1995, Osaghe 1998).

pus cultism' and 'the home of the cults'. From 1977 onwards, NBM published a quarterly magazine called "The Black Axe" (renamed "Uhuru" in 1985).

The internet acts as space for image creation, representation, self-staging and public contestation. *"The Neo Black Movement of Africa does not have any relationship with the organization called 'The Black Axe Confraternity'*. [...] *The Neo Black Movement is not a secret cult*. [...] *The Neo Black Movement of Africa does not operate any structures in campuses anywhere in the world and does not have student members"*. (wikipedia 18. 05. 2007). *"NBM is a registered socio-cultural, non-racist, apolitical, non-profit making and non-religious organisation"* (NBM homepage 26. 07. 2007). The readers' reaction to the wikipedia representation ranges from praise for NBM's intellectual contribution to the perfect mirror image: *"We are an organization which believes that warfare* [against the oppression of blacks] *is better fought with the mind, hence we do not subscribe to the violence on Nigerian campuses in so much that we have put out several disclaimers time and time to distance our revered name from those ignoramuses who are influenced by MTV hip hop culture"* (NBM member at wikipedia 18. 05. 2007). *"The Neo Black Movement is the worst thing ever to come out of any university anywhere not just in Nigeria. It's nothing more than a brutal gang populated by thieves, rapists and murderers who parade themselves as respectable students"* (NBM opponent at wikipedia 18. 05. 2007). Even though this public debate may be interpreted as an expression of cult identity, also here, the crucial question remains unanswered – is there any operational connection between NBM and campus Black Axe?

Academic explanation of why the pacifist movement became violent during the 1970s, is based on the interplay of the Nigerian governments, the university authorities and the Student Unions. The time was characterized by a disastrous education policy, a difficult economic situation, the frequent use of violence by the state, the easy availability of weapons starting in the 1980s, the oppression of students' political engagement and confrontation of all parties.

Campus cultism can be roughly divided into four periods. Until 1972, the Pyrates remained the only students' confraternity. But another student club, which later evolved into the Eiye confraternity, increasingly attracted former members of the Pyrates, who felt that the Pyrates stressed too much on their rules of discipline. In 1972, after internal disputes, some Pyrates broke away from the original organization and founded the Buccaneers, which became a collecting pond for students who were rejected membership by the Pyrates (This Day, 02. 01. 2002). Authors trace the first tensions between the confrater-

nities to this period, even when offering slightly different historiographies. Independently, other students' organizations were established during the 1970s. The more the new Students' Unions and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) acted on behalf of the students, the more the legitimacy of the campus confraternity faced contestation. This opposition was fuelled by university authorities, which tried to put down the Students' Unions political activism. Union members shifted their work to the political underground to elude oppression from authorities. This elusion entailed the restructuring of the Students' Unions and led to some organizational similarity with the confraternities (Owoeye 1997). An important milestone of student protest was the Kunle-Adepeju-Affair of 1971 in Ibadan, where a student was shot. The government of General Gowon did not respond to growing criticism of the incident and refused to establish a fact-finding commission. As a result, the use of arms against students remained unchanged (Ojo 1995). Students' protests in 1973 and 1974 were 'calmed down' via tear gas and light weapons by the police – leading to the extension of crisis to other universities as well as to the kidnapping of police and military men in Lagos and Zaria. As a result, all universities, except Nsukka, were closed down for some time. Other students' protests followed in Ibadan 1975/76, and in Lagos in 1978 (recalled as Ali-Must-Go-Affair). The protests were accompanied by violent clashes between national forces, the police and students and led to a radicalization of the students as well as to more oppression by the public authorities. According to Osaghae (1998), *"one important lesson of the crisis was that* [the students] *had a great role to play in articulating civil society grievances under military rule.* [...] *Students subsequently spearheaded revolts against unpopular government policies and action* [...] *Gradually strong alliances were built between students, labour, the press, professional associations"*. The role of the confraternities in these protests remains opaque. Some confraternity members joined, and at times, even led the Students' Unions. Newly established confraternities already resembled secret societies. A complex system of group-specific secret codes developed to draw lines between the various organizations which competed over members, resources and political influence on campus but also to protect politically active members against repression. Political violence increased during the 1970s under the civil government of President Shagari. The police forces were enlarged from 1979 to 1983 to tenfold its regular size, military expenditure rose from 3 Mio to 39 Mio Naira within the same period. The new para-military police, referred to as 'kill-and-go-police', brutally fought back any student and other political appraisal (Osaghae 1998). Campus confraternities were prohibited in 1979 by

classifying them as secret cults. The classification of confraternities as secret societies in the 1970s must be interpreted as a strategy to eliminate the organizations that protected political opponents. But this strategy did not materialize in praxis. The regulation was upheld in the national constitution of 1999: *"Secret society includes any society, association, group or body of persons (whether registered or not) (a) that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols and which is formed to promote a cause* [...] *to foster the interest of its members and to aid one another under any circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice to the detriment of the legitimate interest of those who are not members; (b) the membership of which is incompatible with the function or dignity of any public office under this Constitution and whose members are sworn to observe oaths of secrecy; or (c) the activities of which are not known to the public at large, the names of whose members are kept secret and whose meetings and other activities are held in secret."*

During the 1980s, the university system started facing severe crises leading to immense brain drain. Under the Buhari regime, NANS protest was prohibited and much student unrest was brutally put down which led to the closure of universities. In 1983, six Pyrates were killed by the police during an Anti-Police-Brutality-Rally. Students' protested all over the country. At the same time, violent cult clashes were reported in different universities. The then illegal campus cults became involved in antagonist struggles and confra wars. According to Oguntuase, President Babangida made use of competition between the campus confraternities by initiating new confraternities, the Vikings and the Mafia, which were utilized as a counter-force to keep students under control (NAS homepage 15. 01. 2003). President Abacha is said to have followed the same strategy later on. Even though there is no hard evidence, the abuse of students' organizations by the government, university authorities, and politicians seems very probable, because Students' Union activists could not be prosecuted by conventional means and the assignment of police on campus was inflexible. Instead, student organizations were infiltrated by spies and 'trouble makers', who received money and passes (passed exams) to stir conflict within the groups and to manipulate groups in the interest of politicians and other individuals (e.g. Fawole 1997, Ogunsanya 2000, Soyinka quoted in Newswatch 31. 07. 2001). Interview partners reported that Black Axe fought under the unofficial mandate of Uniben authorities during student demonstrations in the end of the 1990s. When the prohibitation of campus cults was reconfirmed in 1989, some organizations reacted with open mockery by launching a public recruitment campaign (Fawole 1997).

Conditions on campus further degraded during the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1995 almost seven percent of lecturers moved abroad. On the one hand, Students' Unions protested by demonstrating and kidnapping of university authorities, and also by destroying property. On the other hand, campus cult violence dramatically increased. Campus cults became targets for media and politics. Claims to pacify the universities called public authorities to action, their failure to control the upset students undermined the remains of their legitimacy. After the takeover of President Abacha in 1993, an official policy against the campus cults was launched while the unofficial support of particular organizations further enhanced the conflicts on campus. The dissident Soyinka was branded the 'Godfather of Campus Terror', but the Nigerian public did not follow this argument. On 10th July 1999, the country was shaken by the Ife Massacre – a brutal cult clash killing eight sleeping students and entailing a number of political consequences. The case was delicate, because the Ife Student Union had observed preparations of the attack and given out public warnings but the university authorities refused to take action against the suspects. The Vice Chancellor of Ife University was accused of being a patron of the attacking cult. Even though seven of the 40 hit squads were arrested, none of them was brought to court (Newswatch 19. 07. 1999, TELL 26. 07. 1999, Vanguard 01. 11. 2002). The government of President Obasanjo came under political pressure and established a fact-finding committee. Its suggestions were implemented, including the creation of an Anti-Campus-Cultism-Fund for 300 Million Naira, as well as the establishment of a special police and information unit. The fund was allocated directly to the universities and used for security measures, such as street lights. New anti-cultism movements also received funding, such as the Global Peace Movement or the Anti Cultism Crusade Organisation Nigeria (ACCON), which organized an Anti-Cultism-Rally in 1999 and 2000.[9] Unrelated to this, lecturers frequently went on strike, students continued demonstrating and universities were regularly closed down. It can be assumed that in some places, *"Cult members are in the executive committees of most of the registered and prestigious socio-cultural organizations on campus"* as it was the case in Ibadan (Ogunsanya 2000). Conflict lines, actors and agendas became indefinite.

Violent cult clashes decreased and even flared up in a new wave of unknown intensity after the year 2000. In the light of the rallies, a new form of violence was observed – jungle justice on suspected members

[9] Anti-cult movements run promotion campaigns against campus cultism, organized public renunciations and worked on the rehabilitation of former campus cultists. Formally, members had renounced campus cultism or never joined any cult before. In fact, membership status of individuals was not always clear.

of campus cults by anti-cult organizations starting with the death of the student Gabriel Adewale in 2001. In the same year, about 12 students were killed and 65 brutally beaten for suspected cult membership at Lagos State University (LASU) alone. Similar incidences also occured in other universities (Newswatch 31. 07. 2002, Tempo 25. 07. 2002, Daily Champion 07. 07. 2002, Vanguard 05. 07. 2002). In Ile-Ife, vigilantes called AWO Anti Cult Machine put *"a sort of judicial system in place"* to *"annihilate cultists"* including a death sentence (Aina et al. 2003: 12). Due to vigilante activities, some cults have left campus and started to affect neighbourhoods with off-campus student population (P.M. News 06. 06. 2002). However, not only violence was observed by LASU Vice chancellor Leigh: *"the students, I can say 90 percent, were calling the shots. They were running a parallel government. Anything they wanted to do they did without any recourse to any authorities. They were selling university lands. They were running their businesses. They were running busses. They were running radio stations.* [. . .] *It was near anarchy backed by the force of arms"* (Vanguard 31. 07. 2002).

At some universities, violence was stirred by the cults as well as the Students Union therefore producing a blurring of perpetrators. Further, students are increasingly involved in armed robbery (Newswatch, 19. 07. 1999). In Benin City, armed robbers were usually identified as gangs of students.

In April 2002, Oguntuase, former president of the legal Pyrates was invited for a meeting of campus cult leaders with the target of their National Inter-Confraternity Council (NIFC) to wipe out violence by creating the Campus Peace Foundation, the abandonment of student members, a de-mystification program, the promotion of transparent student confraternities, as well as the disarming of the students. According to the NFIC, not the organizations but the violence should be fought. Individual membership is not to be criminalized because, as the Buccaneers representative Deji Hassan summarized, *"whenever they call the boys bastards or rogues, we are not going to dissociate ourselves from them.* [. . .] *If we give the boys orders, they'll obey. Even what their fathers cannot tell them, we'll tell them and they'll do it. We are going to re-orientate our boys to embrace peace. We are employing psychologists, guidance and councilors etc. to handle the matter"* (The News 26. 04. 2002). The NFIC policy is based on the idea of 'rescue & reform' instead of the 'search & destroy' strategy pursued by the anti-cultism movements.

A sad highlight of the period following 2000 was the Nsukka Incident of 14 June 2002, where 12 students were shot during examina-

tions. Here, the conflict line seemed to have run between campus cults and members of the anti-cultism movement.

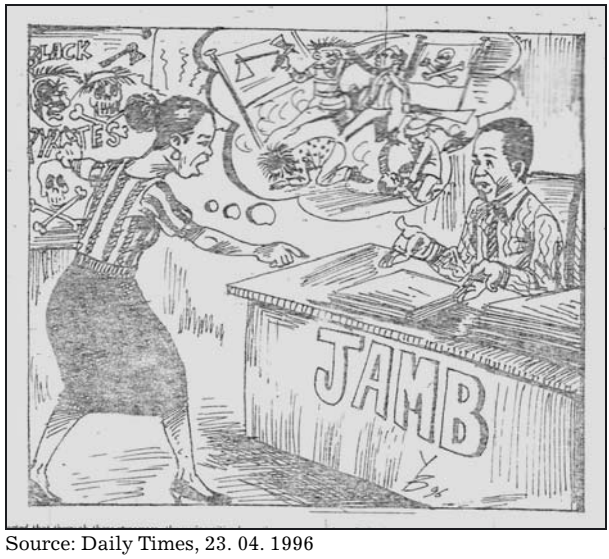
IV. Churches, Cultists and Crusades

West African sodalities are all but secret. In communities where they operate, their symbols, rules and activities were known by most adults. While the British colonial administration acknowledged the sodalities' regulatory potential and integrated them in their political system of indirect rule, the relationship between Christian missions and secret societies was driven by tension and violent conflict. Conflicts were fueled by the colonial Native Courts system, which formally challenged the sodalities' legitimacy as rule-setting and sanctioning institution (Nolte 2004, Pratten 2008a). Pentecostalism has grown in Benin City since the 1990s, and these churches *"have instigated vociferous and occasionally violent campaigns against* [local] *shrines, indicting them as secret cults'"* (Gore and Pratten 2003). The same strategy was applied to campus cults. Merely Pentecostal groups acted as drivers of the eradication campaign. They declared a crusade against campus cults, which was supported by media coverage. Images of the evil and the occult were central references of the campaign. Campus cultism was presented as a severe degradation of social behavior as well as a lack of spiritual guidance. The crusade was based on spiritual exhortation. Paradoxically, this approach resulted in a 'rescue and forgive' attitude, which further diminished the state's sanctioning abilities against crime committed by cultists. According to Owuamanam (1999), the main guidelines of the church groups' actions were: *"Secret Cult is evil and a cult member is a sinner against God and his fellow men* [...] *To receive God's pardon, the cult member must confess his cult membership and activities and renounce them by promising not to go back to them. His fellow men* [...] *have an obligation to forgive the cult member and forget his offences if they are to receive forgiveness from God for their own sins."* For the exhortation to be effective, the integration of the former campus cult members in a Christian community is required, where he receives spiritual amnesty. The Nigerian government joined in to these activities by declaring a legal amnesty for all cultists who renounced their membership before the passing of certain deadlines. The campaign took place in universities and churches and was widely broadcasted.

The national amnesty concerned illegal membership in campus cults as well as crimes committed by members, such as armed robbery. Legal persecution was abandoned because there was lack of evidence to fol-

low up cases. The national court system was also not effective (partly due to cult networks of patrons). Members, who wanted to leave the organizations received support and protection, but single campus cults also manipulated the campaign by either sending all members to the renunciation or by later placing the names of their members on the amnesty list without renunciation. As a result, core or criminal members enjoyed legal amnesty before 'going underground'. Some even positioned themselves in newly established and publicly funded anti-cult movements, where they continued to serve their organizations (Osha 2000, Eguavoen 2003).

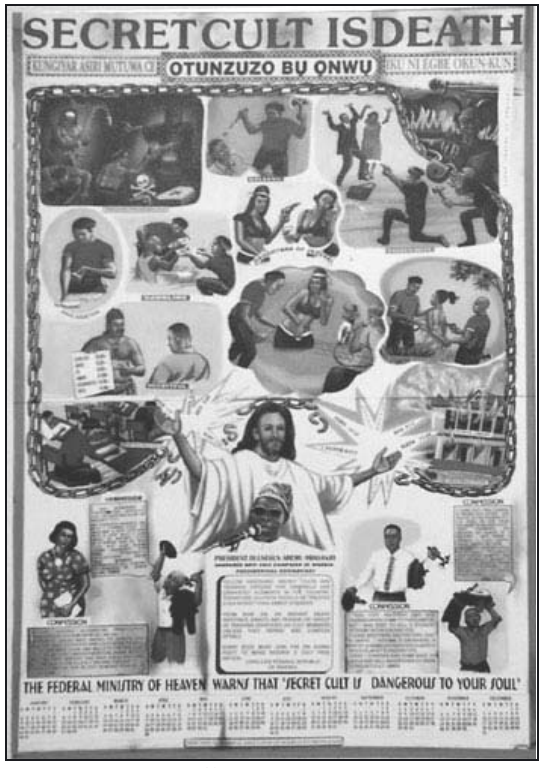
Nigerian scholars used the mass media because it was then the most efficient way to gain a public voice. As the discourse remained merely popular, it resulted in low transparency with regard to empirical findings (Aina et al. 2003). Media have the potential to construct meaning for readers without first hand knowledge even though they spread exaggerated or fragmentary information (Adelola 1997, Ogunsanya 2000). Reports on campus cults produced fear as they took up the existing anxieties of readers and fed them with words and graphics. Popular images of evil were illustrated with stories and pictures, which stirred anxieties. Adelola (1997) analyzes cartoons, which show men with masks, regalia, weapons, sculls and slogans such as *"Blood for Blood"* or *"For Total Destruction"*. Reports on campus cults reproduced horrifying vocabulary (Eguavoen 2003).



Source: Daily Times, 23. 04. 1996

Figure 2: Cartoon

Impressive images of evil manifest the widespread belief in witchcraft and ritual murder found in Nigeria. Popular horror stories are visualized on Nigerian calendars and in movies and implicitly refer to change with regard to values systems and social commitments (Harnischfeger 1997, Moore and Sanders 2002, Bastian 2002, McCall 2004, Wendl 2004). The image of campus cults is but one illustration of how a society deals with rapid social change. The mystification of evil may also serve as inspiration for campus cults (Ifaturoti 1994). No hard evidence was found to support the existence of occult practices. Hints towards invulnerability against bullets, superhuman sexual abilities, and magical manipulation of students as well as human sacrifices seem rather to originate from the media than be based on students' experience (Ogunsanya 2000, Bastian 2002).



Source: John McCall [10]

Figure 3: Popular Poster

[10] http://mccoy.lib.siu.edu/jmccall/otherafricas, 13. 05. 2008

A popular poster illustrates the actors in the crusade against campus cultism. It is headlined *"Secret cult is death"* implying the well known continuation *"Jesus is life."* The devil in the upper right corner locks the cultist with a strong chain. The single scenes show students performing occultism, committing armed robbery and killing people. They are drug addicts. They cheat in exams, kidnap people and set fire. Female cultists are improperly dressed and heavily armed. Jesus standing behind the former President Obasanjo breaks the metal chain in pieces surrounded by quotations from the Bible, while Obasanjo reads a government declaration and appeals to the reader to stay away from campus cultism. His text refers to the death penalty for cult members, irrespective of the non-existence of such a law. In the lower part of the poster, one sees four persons renouncing membership. The closing of ranks between Christian groups and Nigerian government culminates in a final piece of advice for readers by the, needless to say non-existent, *"Federal Ministry of Heaven",* to watch their soul.

V. Conclusion

Campus cultism shows clear parallels to other violent youth movements. When the state fails to provide reliable services, non-state agents sneak in and take over such state functions (Lund 2007). In Nigeria, this can be observed in extrajudicial sentencing and execution (‚instant justice') to fight crime and provide security. The past decade witnessed a rise of militant youth organizations comprise primarily single, urban men between eighteen and forty years of age – an age category characterized by limited access to resources, low social status as well as little decision-making power. Different from vigilantes, campus cultists are usually from better-off homes and possess a higher education status (Smith 2006). Still, they often face the same lack of opportunities, such as youth unemployment, especially because the formal economy which used to provide jobs for graduates has collapsed. It is argued that violent young men do not aim at reforming the social and political system. Instead, they are fighting their way in (Reno 2005). Background of youth violence seems to be the *"heightened inequality in a population that is younger, more educated and urbanized, and full of frustrated ambitions* [. . .] *They have been disappointed by both patron-clientelism and by the mechanisms of the neo-liberal state"* (Smith 2006). Campus cultism and student activism as other youth movements employ two seemingly opponent strategies: building (opaque) social networks as well as fighting for transparency, accountability and active participation informed by democratic ideas. (Of course, campus cultism is merely apolitical and destructive.) The problem is,

however, that on one hand, *"if democracy is to prevail, secret cultism cannot be allowed since their values and modus operandi are incompatible with democracy"* (Osha 2000), especially if it perpetrates violence or frequently violates state law. On the other hand, action may be illegal but socially legitimate as long as it serves the principle of clientelistic accountability (Chabal and Deloz 1999). Hence, youth movements may be perceived as legitimate as far as their violent action serves a community.

In Nigeria, the lack of security is often glossed as 'disorder', which displays its own rationality. In the public perception, urban crime increases, especially armed robbery (Agbola 1997, Baker 2002, Egbue 2006). Many people are convinced that the police do not offer a solution to the problem of crime. Since the end of the military regime in 1999, numerous vigilantes appeared; displaying diversity in history, motivation, and their readiness for violence. Well-known are the Bakassi Boys, the Ooduna Peoples Congress, the Egbesu Boys, the Arewa Peoples Congress as well as the 'Yan dana and 'Yan hisba. Many more are less well-documented. Vigilantes conduct extrajudicial trials and act as executive. The organizations directly compete with state security forces when taking over their function of criminal prosecution and law enforcement. This works because an imagined social order (Baker 2002) has been established whereby twilight institutions make use of state symbols and enjoy toleration by state authorities or even their formal recognition (Lund 2007).

Despite the wide spectrum of violent youth movements, a number of similarities can be stated with regard to organizational structure, modes of operation, public representation, ambiguous identity (criminals and counter-criminals) (Gore and Pratten 2003), as well as between non-state and state (Lund 2007). The reaction of authorities towards these organizations is typically an ambivalent policy ranging from instrumentalization and strategic support, to ban and persecution. Another common characteristic is the frequent reference to local tradition (Bastian 2002, Nolte 2004, Ikelegbe 2006, Harnischfeger 2007, Casey 2008, Pratten 2008a) leading to the fetishization of political violence as well as the mystification of political relations (Ifeka 2006). The imitation of secret societies and rural youth organizations may be explained with processes of institutional bricolage. New institutions build on features of already existing institutions. Via a leakage of meaning (Douglas 1986) the new institutions not only increase functionality but also gain legitimacy.

Some scholars interpret youth violence as a symptom of a social system in disorder characterized by moral decay (Okpalaonwuka 1997,

Sesay et al. 2003, Aina et al. 2003, Egbue 2006). But stressing deviance is problematic due to historical youth violence and forms of accountability; self-defense groups of young men were widespread in rural and urban pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria (Nolte 2004, Casey 2008, Pratten 2008a). If vigilantes serve communities by banishing robbers, regulating the traffic or administering markets, they are seen as guardians – even when perpetrating violence. Vigilantism is part of the local political culture and supported by the majority of the population across all social classes (Baker 2002). When these services start to take a back seat, the public discourse rapidly labels the same youth groups area boys, cultists, or robbers. This shift of perspective was observed with several organizations, including campus cults. Such a shift may also show an adverse trend by pointing out positive aspects of crime committing organizations. Here, the legal reference and individual agenda provide the framework for interpretation.

Youth in Nigeria have always played an important role for politics, be it as supporters, opponents, overt or hidden hit force. This holds true for campus cults as well as for vigilantes. Campus cults have been employed as vigilantes by university authorities. And university authorities have employed vigilantes to fight campus cultism. Another characteristic typical of most youth violence also is that conflict lines, actors and agendas are rather complicated and blurred. Prime examples are vigilantes in the Niger Delta (Ikelegbe 2006, Ifeka 2006). In a rather uncertain situation, alternative actors may provide binding structure by establishing regulations. These normative bodies may also contain revitalized local or religious rules that are at times interpreted more rigorously than in their original context (Casey 2008).

Campus cultism has filled some gaps in regulation, leadership and infrastructure provision on campus. It can be interpreted as a result of political oppression, social change as well as the incapacity of university authorities to effectively meet their official mandate. Campus cultism responds to various students' requirements, such as accommodation, supportive networks, small credits and income generation, building contact for future professional life, entertainment and adventure as well as the regulation of campus affairs and persecution of corrupt lecturers. Campus cultism also provides the framework for examination malpractices or crime by protecting members against legal persecution. The best strategy to fight violence has been to offer appropriate services to students. Campus cultism has not gained foothold at private universities established from 2000 onwards due to good infrastructure, accountability of university authorities, strong regulation (at times backed with strict religious rules) and high sanctioning ability of authorities against student malpractices.

The upkeep of violence may be instrumentalized to result in permanent insecurity and anxiety. Twilight providers, such as campus cults, may keep up the demand for security. Cults cash in on existing uncertainties by regulating security on campus. The popular culture of evil is taken up by the organizations to stoke fears to enhance the legitimacy of their extortion practices. For few cult members, it is lucrative to upkeep insecurity and to extort money from anxious students. For many cult members, however, paying for security and services seems the right strategy to deal with insecurity. As a result, financial resources are reallocated within the student population.

What is important to state is that for all students, it seems profitable to invest in social networks which may support them in their future professional and personal life, especially in a situation of economic insecurity awaiting them after graduation.

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Summary

Many students died due to violent secret campus cult activities in the past decade. The article describes the sodalities and shows how they are perceived in the public discourse. It further illuminates how the ambiguous perception of campus cultism complicates the eradication of cult-related violence. It argues that campus cults are twilight institutions which on one hand provide insecurity on campus by stoking fears and promote violent conflict settlements but on the other hand also act as security providers.

Zusammenfassung

Zahlreiche Studenten wurden Opfer von sogenannten *secret campus cults*. Der Artikel beschreibt die gewalttätigen Bünde und zeigt, wie sie im öffentlichen Diskurs wahrgenommen werden. Er beleuchtet, wie die zweideutige Wahrnehmung ihre Bekämpfung auf dem Campus erschwert. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Bünde *twilight institutions* seien, die einerseits zur Unsicherheit auf dem Campus beitragen, indem sie Ängste schüren und gewaltsame Konfliktlösung propagieren, andererseits aber auch als Sicherheitskräfte agieren.

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