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To.

Ovia Eboikaboere

God Bless you.

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ERADICATION OF CULTS IN NIGERIA- "POSSIBILITY AND PLAUSIBILITY"

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Nigeria like many other African nations is deeply entrenched in cultism, this being a specific system of religious worship or devoted attachment to a person, idea or activity or being a devotee of a popular fashion. From time immemorial, cultism has been an integral part of man hence his affiliation to a physical man or a spirit being. There are open as well as secret cults, both being less complex in early times but in contemporary times their operations are more complex with more vague goals. In contemporary times however, emergence of cults and cultic practices are on the increase due to situations arising from civilization and self centeredness. This paper attempts at examining the meaning of cultism in Nigeria and its historical presence and purpose in Nigeria. A critical examination of traditional cults vis-à-vis their original objectives as against contemporary cults and their objectives shall be looked at. The paper concludes that the possibility and plausibility of eradicating cults and cultic practices in Nigeria is a tall dream as current issues that the society is faced with in contemporary times indicate.

Key words: - Cult, Tradition, Belief, Myth, Curse, Coronation, Taboos.

Introduction

Nigeria as a country is not different from other specific countries in the continent of Africa or the world in general. The existence of cults in the world and Nigeria is not a new phenomenon and its strength or wane in practice is not a strange concept. Consequently, to examine the possibility and plausibility of the eradication of cults in Nigeria is dependent to a large extent on one's understanding of the term cult. In order to do justice to this topic, there is the need to define such key word as cult- especially as it pertains to its understanding and usage by the writer. Other necessary definitions and explanations especially as closely related to cult include traditions, beliefs and myths. In examining the above topic, specific communities in Nigeria and their day to day practices shall be brought to the fore in relation to our understanding of cults and their practices. The method that shall be employed in this paper shall be qualitative analysis of data in print.

What is a cult? It is a specific system of religious worship according to the *Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus*¹. This gives the vivid impression that the practice of cultic acts are in the form of religious worship. It is an embodiment of a system of a particular system of worship that is unique to a particular group. This also implies that it is a devoted attachment, a readiness of the devotees to guard jealously their belief(s) and consequent attachment to the ideals of the founder of the sect, his ideas or recommended activities. As it is with any religious set up also, the ideas and activities of a cult can be open to a certain extent while others may be shrouded in secrecy- but however revealed to some specific cadre of devotees, either under oath and initiation rites.

This broad definition of cult embraces every form of sectoral worship system in every given society.

Tradition is a set of beliefs that is peculiar to a group of people, a person, a community or a society. Its origin is generally obscure, usually not dated nor can it be traced to any author or authors. But through narration over a period of time, it gains ground and becomes acceptable. This means that the traditions of a given people are normally handed down from the immemorable past. Tradition is the human vehicle through which a given understanding of the belief systems of a people is articulated. This is taught and passed on from one-generation to another through folklores, folktales, proverbs, and songs among others. The message may not be logically coherent in its presentation, but the essence which is its particular message must be passed on. Traditions in Nigeria imply the position that the universe as perceived or experienced has a supernatural origin which controls the happenings in our physical universe. Plotinus once said man has a desire to depend on a supernatural source for inspiration, instructions, and direction- all of which is expressed in traditions and beliefs. In the words of Abanuka "In the innermost centre of his being, man appears to recognize that his true home is not here: his heart seems to be yearning for a reality which surpasses the being of man himself...."²

The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines belief in simple terms as "the feeling of certainty that something exists or is true."³ It is trust or confidence in something or someone, it is the opinion or conviction that a principle for instance is true though without proof. In this wise it can be likened to religious faith. The strong conviction that a Supreme Being called God though invisible, orders the world and it's affairs is one of such beliefs- though not supported with proofs. Simple ways through which traditions are expressed include salutations such as "safe journey", salutation to the national flag of one's country. Other expressions include closing of one's eyes while praying, raising of hands or eyes to the skies, kneeling, clasping of one's hands among others, are inbuilt religious beliefs and traditions that are intended to "excite feelings".

A myth is that which though cannot be backed with facts and figures, though defies logical reasoning and coherence, is nevertheless accepted as true by the people. A myth is a product of the human mind and is often told as a story. To authenticate it, the traditions and beliefs of the given people are woven into it. Thus among the Yoruba's there is the Orunmila who comes as the representative of Olodumare to the earth. Though Orunmila the earth is given shape and form by employing Ogun the god of iron. He gives and blesses war and farm (with metallic implements). Among the Igbos, there is the myth of the four gods who visited the earth and became responsible for the four days that comprise the week and consequently the four markets namely Eke, Orie, Afor and Nkwo. The four gods are also recognized as the guardian spirits of these markets. There is also the myth of how Chukwu through Nri provided farm produce for man and the conditions man must observe in order to have continued harvest.

A close look at cults, traditions, beliefs and myths, and their development from primordial to contemporary times indicate continuity. "The main characteristics of ...development from primordial Consciousness are tradition and continuity"⁴

Traditions and Beliefs as the Fabric of the Nigerian Society

As it is every society, there are basic structures or parts that are woven into the social unit of a community. These serve as binding force, a coercive force and the survival of the society depends on these. For the African and indeed the Nigerian people traditions, beliefs and myths have served this purpose. The Nigerian society is a typical traditional one where an organized

group of people are joined together by such common interests like religion, culture and language among others.

Cult, having been defined as a specific system of religious worship related activities abound in every facet of the society. This is more so when the Nigerian believes that God, the Supreme Being is at the highest apex controlling the universe including man. Next to him is the divinities followed by the ancestors and thereafter are the potent spiritual forces. For Oguntola-Laguda "This is manifested in the charms the people wear, libations made to the Spirits and ancestors during crisis of life."⁵

The Nigerian perceives himself as both spirit and material. To this end traditional kings and chiefs are more revered because of their spiritual roles. Thus as soon as a king is coroneted he becomes sacred. In Yoruba land South West Nigeria, a king is referred to as the second in command to the gods (Alase Ekeji Orisa). He must not be struck by anyone or the whole community will incur the wrath of the gods. The Ooni of Ife at installation becomes the spiritual head of the Yoruba's as well as head of all the priests at Ife. It is said of Ife that of the 365 days in a year, only one day (which is not known to many) is no sacrifice or ritual performed to the spirit world for one purpose or another. In his new status, whatever the king says happens to the community and its indigenes.

Explaining the origin of war among the Yoruba's, tradition has it that Awole a disobedient and rebellious Alaafin of Oyo in 1796 pronounced a curse on his subjects and domain. According to D. Oritseeje:

He stood on the forecourt of his palace and shot three arrows, one to the south and one to the west, saying "My curse be to you for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on errand let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will you be carried as slaves. My curse will carry you to the seas, and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you their masters will become slaves. He broke an earthenware dish, crying "broken calabash can be mended but not a broken earth dish, so let my words be irrevocable."⁶

This curse is believed to have been responsible for the numerous inter-tribal wars which the Yoruba's experienced for a long time. This Oritseeje says explains the non fusion of the authority of the Alaafin on other Yoruba's ever since. From the North of Nigeria came the Jihadist assault on Ilorin, Dahomey invaded her for slaves, the Ijebus and Egbas fought for their independence from the old Oyo Empire. This eventually culminated in the 1855 conference of all Oyo towns-to shun war as a means of settling scores, and the voluntary payment of tribute to the Alaafin. They also proposed a peace pact with the Egbas and Ijebus.⁷

Still on the belief on the consequences of curses on man and community, Tekena N. Tamuno in 1985(so many years after colonialism and it's consequent civilization characterized by the coming of Christianity) asked that efforts be made by elders to enable Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe "the former leader and candidate of the Nigerian People's Party during the 1983 Federal elections for the post of President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, forget and forgive the past."⁸ He desired that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe hold no grudge against Nigeria. Tamuno therefore pleaded that "Dr. Azikiwe be persuaded, next, to lift a curse uttered under intense provocation in August 1983"⁹ This he says is necessary:

Based on an aspect of Nigerian tradition which seldom allowed any curse uttered by elder, for whatever reason, to stay, as it were, on the ground regarded as sacred, for any length of time without measures being taken to lift it.¹⁰

The now late Dr. Azikiwe was an octogenarian in 1985, a founding father of Nigeria's Independence, a celebrated Onitsha Chief (Owelle), an elder statesman- all of which attributes pass him for an elder; whose pronouncement is deemed of immense effect just like that of the Yoruba kings and chiefs.

Traditions and beliefs play a major role in the coronation process of most Nigerian kings and chieftains. Among the Tivs in the middle belt of Nigeria, for a person to qualify as a leader he must have a strong personality, "rich in witchcraft... master of many of the "akombo rites", used to "set right the land"¹¹. The spiritual element in this society is so prominent, that its relevance comes to fore in appointment to leadership role. The Tivs' rates a man to be living well when he is one with his compound, lineage and the cosmos. He is a complete being when he can intermingle with his spiritual and physical lineage. For "Tobe separated from them was to be cut off from the stream of life."¹² In line with the above, the oracle is likely to have a say in the choice of a leader in the society therefore. The totality of the Tiv way of life is a religious institution that embodies ritual dances, sacrifices and offerings to spirit forces.¹³

A number of taboos exist in the Nigerian society pertaining to behavior and presentation. For instance among the Tiv it is taboo for a woman to touch or partake of the head of an ox when killed, to look into a grave to bury a frog or dog or even step over one.¹⁴ Among the Igbo's of Nigeria is the myth of how Chukwu through Nri provided farm produce for man. For continued bumper harvest however, man is to observe certain taboos such as that yam is to be planted by men only, a woman should not climb a palm tree not to think of tapping wine, the yam festival (yam medicine) should be observed each year.¹⁵

Closely linked to taboos is the performance of rituals. This is more so when a person defaults in the observance of taboos and have to appease the gods (the spirit world) in order not to face repercussion. The oracle in Igbo land is believed to play supernatural roles such as settling disputes, determining bounty seasons, meting out punishment by way of epidemics low harvest of crops, absence of rain, among others. The highest ranking oracle for them is that at Arochukwu.¹⁶

Rituals involve invocations, incantations, symbols and prayers. All or some of these are employed at one time or the other at funerals, marriages, child bearing, naming ceremonies, puberty periods or even women's monthly period. The water goddess Iyemoja for instance is worshipped because of its importance in fishing culture, Sango is worshipped for societal well being, ethical and societal values. Obatala the god of love is worshipped in order to encourage love among indigenes¹⁷. In Eastern Nigeria, the Nkpa people celebrate the Iza-ahia festival every two years in honor of the gods of human fertility. Some others are the Ofala of Onitsha, the Argungun of Sokoto, and the Osun of Osogbo- all to propitiate the spirit beings. This is in order to receive more blessings¹⁸.

In contracting and conducting marriage the Nigerian society still brings in tradition. In order to maintain peace among neighbouring communities, the "Igbo's are forbidden to marry from their lineage and as such they go to other lineages to marry"¹⁹. The Tiv's basic tradition concerning marriage is in the form of exchange. It is seen as a way of preserving continuity of the individual with the group. The practice is that for a man to marry a wife, he must have a sister that will be

married into his spouse's family. Thus "The elder sons took their sisters as wards... (While) the younger son waited until another sister or niece was born, he then claimed her for exchange marriage"²⁰. In this way, maltreatment of spouses is curtailed. Solemnization of marriage among the Ogu of Badagry include offering of prayers by elderly members of both families with such items as honey, salt, kola nut, etc. Each of these items is used with its significance in mind. The symbolic ceremony of washing of the bride's feet before her entry into the husband's family is part of the ritual.

Child naming is a time of exhibiting traditions and beliefs. The Ogu's have is that a male child is named on the ninth day while a female is named on the seventh day.⁽²¹⁾ On the naming day, the mother of the new born child is forbidden to eat until the traditional rites that that are relevant are performed. Furthermore, at the dropping of the umbilical cord, a special local delicacy "ahomfre" is prepared and served with assorted drinks²². Muslims are known to shave the baby's hair among other rituals at the naming of a child.

The Nigerian markets are traditional and sometimes mystical or at least spiritual in nature. In Badagry for instance each of the markets is situated near shrines- the gods of the shrines serving as guardian spirit of each of them. The Vlekete slave market was and still is situate near the vlekete divinity and it's shrine.²³ A sensational aspect of the market is that

*It used to be the arena for public trials by the traditional religious worshippers. It was the major and most popular slave market Located around the southwest coast of Nigeria. Slaves from near and far were brought to Vlekete market on regular basis for sales or in exchange for exotic merchandise brought by the European slave dealers.*²⁴

The Agia tree, botanically known as Dialium Guineense (caesal piniaceas) stood for about 350 years.²⁵ It served as shelter for rest during farming activities, later as communal spot where important public meetings were held. According to Olaide-Mesewaku the tree "grew in importance serving not only natural, social, political and economic interests but religious interests."²⁶ The Obada market was built around it in 1889 but later moved to Agbalata in 1954.²⁷ The tree is so deified by the Vothum worshippers that it became their symbol and base. At the coming of the first Christian missionary Thomas Birch Freeman to Badagry in 1842, the tree served as a rallying point- capture the attention of the people. By 1877 the badagry central Mosque was situated near the famous before tree of Agia. When it finally fell on June 20th, 1959 at about 11.45pm due to a storm; important personalities took photographs by it local council staff cleared its remains the next day. To indicate its worth, the present day Town Hall is erected where the tree used to be.²⁸

Like most Nigerian traditional markets, the main market Agbalata holds every nine days for four days running. The other one's hold every night one after the other in a rotational arrangement. Periodic markets also abound in Tiv land as well as among the Igbos. The markets serve as places for exchange of news, meeting places for family and relatives dwelling in neighbouring communities, etc. Alaba Simpson further sees markets in Nigeria playing spiritual roles. In Badagry, old and contemporary two traditional officials occupy the apex position of the market- namely De Ahingan (male titled chief and market leader) and Ne Ahingan (female titled chief and market leader). Their duties backed by the market committee are to ensure peace, prosperity and cleanliness of the market. They also settle disputes. The Ne Ahingan and De Ahingan furthermore ensure spiritual orderliness by meeting with traditional diviners (Bokono), to deliberate on events that may be taking place in and around the market as well the community. Some include consulting with the oracle in order to stop possible handicaps targeted at the

market. These two especially meet with the incumbent Akran i. e. King and his cabinet members and perform rituals as well as prayers ensuring the smooth running of the market. Rituals and prayers abound that are performed every ninth day before the commencement of the main market.²⁹

The formation of security forces and vigilante groups in Nigeria reveal our traditional/cultic practices. Among the Ogu Badagry for instance, the most outstanding security force of reckon is the Zangbeto i. e. night person or people. Its origin is shrouded in the myth of a spirit that emerged from the waters to protect the community and also fight their attackers. The only known attire of Zangbeto is raffia. At its head operationally is the Agboadasi, the executive head whose authority is both spiritual and temporal. Every detected criminal act is reported to him whom he adjudicates over. He determines the date of the Zangbeto festival and performs the required sacrifice.³⁰ He is directly answerable to the Akran who is the ceremonial head of the cult. Next to the Agboadasi is the Zangan, a district or quarter officer. He is followed by the Kogan, a supervisor of about ten cult members and a sectional head. There is also a messenger called kisoniyito and modern times a woman patron and a secretary.

The group maintains law and order by day and by night, using tools such as sticks, cutlasses, flutes, and charms. Zangbeto employs spiritual and physical means to maintain peace and orderliness in the society. Says Oyesakin,

To ward off evils in the society sacrifices are made during the Outbreak of epidemics to appease the major divinities of the Egun.(Zangbeto) ... also imposes curfew on the town from 12 midnight to 5.am ... road blocks are mounted at strategic places...(31)

In this way, persons and vehicles moving into town, out of town and within town are checked. Due to reasons such as societal conflicts over boundaries, control of resource areas, religious intolerance among others; armed groups have emerged in various communities. Some of them are the Ogbesu in Niger Delta, the Arewa people's congress in Northern Nigeria, the Oodua People's Congress in Western Nigeria, the Bakassi Boy's in Eastern Nigeria to mention a few. These vigilante groups provide security for their communities. The O.P.C. emerged in 1994 after the annulment of the June 1993 national election involving the late M.K.O. Abiola. Small Arms Survey(32) reports that "There are at least 20 OPC 'zonal commanders', each claiming to lead 200 armed men."(33) It is said to be operational in all six South Western States and Kwara in the north-central Nigeria.

A.P.C. came to be at the instance of the election of chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the then president of Nigeria- a southerner, and furthered by the activities of the OPC. The APC's main goal is to safeguard northern interest in Nigeria.(34) It may not control many states compared to the OPC but when necessary, it employs the services of the "Almanjiris"- unemployed youths found around town and mosques. These unleash terror, furnished with weapons.(35) The Egbesu Boys of Africa(EBA) covers the Niger Delta area, using egbesu-"an Ijaw deity of justice and war to motivate mobilize and embolden it's youths to fight ..."(36) it is said that before and during major operations, the Egbesu deity is consulted.

These security outfits, in order to gain credence before non members and appear superior before opposition factions; lay claim to supernatural powers. In Plateau state due to insecurity resulting from societal conflicts, cultic activities have increased. The use of bamboo stick for protective measures has returned. The Yoruba's are said to use the broom version, claiming to arrest unwanted persons and hypnotizing them to sweep with the broom until he is caught. Charm

dealers in Rivers and Bayelsa States with names like "dey gban" and "dey well" have sprung up, to mention a few. The OPC members boast of possessing charms that defy gun shots, cutlass cuts, etc.

Conclusion:

Reasons for the emergence of the OPC, APC, Bakassi Boys and Egbesu are not farfetched. These include protection of one's interest, to instill integrity and dignity, maintenance of peace and order, preservation of one's traditions and culture, to fight corruption, ethnicity, nepotism, etc. The foregone captures the objectives of cults in the olden days and now, in the pre-colonial times and post independent times. A cult from the dateless times to contemporary days can be defined as a societal club in its mild form and a pressure group in its more serious sense.

Having defined as a specific system of religious worship that is unique to a particular group, cultic practices is an integral part of man. Every man is a cultist, because he is an adherent of one person's ideals or another's recommended activities, etc. In this light the Rotary, Rotaract, Inner Wheels, Lion's, etc clubs are cults. If ways of identifying cult members include particular dress / color code, common ways of salutation, then members of the Celestial Church of Christ can be identified as some. Tradition and myth we said are characterized by obscurity, handed down from the immemorable past through proverbs, folklores, folktales among others. Though the stories may not be logical or coherent in their presentation, belief being a feeling of certainty that what is said is true; accepts it nonetheless.

We further said that cultic practices are manifest in adherent's use of charms and pouring of libations to the spirit beings for reasons such as deliverance, protection or sometimes provision. To this end the use of broom sticks to arrest a thief, fortification of one's person from physical assault, etc is sought after. It is asserted that the Nigerian perceives himself a constituent of spirit material; and the former controls the latter.

Due to man's dual citizenship, pronouncements from deified persons are of uttermost importance to the Nigerian. This is so be it from an Ifa Priest, a King, a church Pastor or Prophet. Prayers and invocations are employed by all- either in the church/ Mosque or Temple/ shrine. Just as the Tivs through marriage curtail maltreatment, so the churches also encourage marriage among members. This is to encourage association of like minds. If all the characteristics discussed in this paper so far capture in a minute way the description of cults, then the possibility of eradicating cults either secret or open is a far dream. A glimpse at the Nigerian's source of morality indicates the place of the spiritual in her thinking. His sense of good and evil originates from his concept of the Supreme Being, God. Violation of any moral code is perceived as disobedience to God and disregard to the ancestors, these being the medium of communication of the moral laws.

Man- either as an individual or a community never abandons his primordial consciousness. It is the bedrock on which his entire worldview rests. No matter how civilized or developed man gets, no matter how scientific or technological, his basic foundation follows him all through. Cultic practices by Christians, Muslims, animists, etc. remain and will continue to interlace the political, economic, social, and marital not to mention the spiritual fabric of the life of man. Man has so much accepted his dual citizenship that in most Nigerian communities, syncretism is practiced by individuals without bathing an eye lid. A person can in the morning be in church for prayers, consult an Imam for the solution of a problem and end it in the shrine of the deities for charms, amulets, sacrifices rituals.³⁷

The possibility, i.e. likeliness or likelihood of eradicating, i.e. completely rid the Nigerian society and indeed the world of cult and cultic practices is to deceive ourselves. The plausibility of

eradicating cultism in Nigeria is not realistic; it is at best an imagined ideal. To eradicate cult from Nigeria and indeed any society is to completely rid society of man. No matter the civilization, no matter his advancement in technology there is an aspect of man that cries out to the spiritual, the invisible. Sometimes it is in seeking for guidance while at other times it is the child-man desiring a father's attention and touch.

Endnotes

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