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Nigeria: Societal and government reactions to student cult activities (2007 - July 2009)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Background

Sources report that student cults continue to be a "worrisome" problem (Aluede and Oniyama Mar. 2009) and a "menace" on student campuses in Nigeria (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009)

Originally formed as associations of like-minded students, student cults have splintered and grown violent over several decades as they clash over control of campuses and engage in criminal activities (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009; Aluede and Oniyama Mar. 2009; *The Economist* 31 July 2008). Among the illicit activities reported to be carried out by the cults are robbery, rape, extortion and murder (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009; Kpangban et al 2008, 139, 141). An article on the pan-African news site *Pambazuka News* reports that there are frequent occurrences of criminal activities at institutions such as the University of Ibadan, the Polytechnic Idadan, the University of Benin and Ambrose Alli University (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009). The article also notes that student cults are starting to appear at private universities although no specific examples were given (ibid.).

Student cult violence has reportedly killed hundreds of people in the past 20 years (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; UN 22 Feb. 2007). According to academic researchers Dr. Raymond O.A. Aluede and Dr. Hope O. Oniyama, students cults have caused deaths at Engugu State University, the University of Benin, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife University, Delta State University and Federal Polytechnic (Mar. 2009). Other incidents have occurred throughout Nigeria (Aluede and Oniyama Mar. 2009). A 2 July 2009 article from *Pambazuka News* reports that over twenty people were recently killed in cult violence in Benin, Edo state (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009).

According to *The Economist*, the situation in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, "is particularly bad" as student cults have become intertwined with the Niger Delta insurgency (31 July 2008). Other sources also report that student cults and Niger Delta militia movements are closely interconnected (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009; UN 28 Jan. 2008; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007). *The Economist* reports that most residents of Port Harcourt "believe that nearly all of today's prominent militant leaders were or still are cult members" (31 July 2008). A report by the Jamestown Foundation, a research institution based in Washington, DC, asserts that the militant groups in the delta region partially originate from the student cults (6 July 2007). The report explains that as cults became more violent they have extended their influence from campuses into the "streets and creeks" of the Niger Delta, while cults members are lured by the money available by fighting on behalf of the insurgent groups (Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007).

According to a study examining the reasons why students at tertiary institutions in Delta state join student cults written by Dr. Emperor Kpangban and associates from the Department of Science Education at Delta State University, some students join cults for protection from other cults and students (Kpangban et al 2008, 140). Others join for the chance to have some measure of power over their peers and faculty members (Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 5). According to Kpangban et al's study, one reason given for joining cults is to pressure lecturers to allow cult members to succeed academically (Kpangban et al 2008, 143; *The Economist* 31 July 2008). Student cults are also used as a method of social networking to gain access to jobs and elite positions (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009; Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 3, 7-8; *The Economist* 31 July 2008).

Social Anthropologist Irit Eguavoen, who authored a 2008 study entitled "Killer Cults on Campus: Secrets, Security and Services Among Nigerian Students", emphasized that cults attempt to recruit favoured candidates based on such criteria as physical presence, wealth and social standing and that many students are intimidated or pressured into joining one group or another (Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 2-5). Eguavoen suggests that male students have little alternative but to join cults due to pressure from existing cultists and some are forced to do so against their will (*ibid.*, 4).

It is reportedly difficult for members to leave the student cults since initiation into a cult confers secrets about the group which the cults feel they must protect (Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 4; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007). Those attempting to leave a cult may receive death threats or be killed (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007).

Actions by Governments and Universities

While sources report that the federal and state governments have passed anti-cultist laws (*Vanguard* 10 Mar. 2009; Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 2; HRW Oct. 2007, 24), limited information on the implementation and success of these laws was found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Rivers State enacted the *Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) Law* in 2004 (*Vanguard* 27 Aug. 2007; *ibid.* 19 Aug. 2007; *The Economist* 31 July 2008), but sources indicate that the law has reportedly been ineffective (*Vanguard* 10 Mar. 2009; *The Economist* 31 July 2008; *Leadership* 25 July 2008). As reported by the national Nigerian newspaper *Vanguard*, while presenting a March 2009 report as head of the Rivers State Truth and Reconciliation Commission, former Supreme Court Justice Kayode Eso declared that the state's government had not shown any serious effort in eliminate cultism, calling the anti-cult law "ineffective" and "inconsequential" (*Vanguard* 10 Mar. 2009).

Eguavoen reports that in 2000, Edo State enacted a *Secret Cult (Prohibition) Bill* which prescribed 21 years in prison for "cult members in public and educational services" (Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 2). Information on the implementation of the Edo State law could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

The United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) reports that former Education Minister Ezekwesili launched a "Students Anti-Thuggery and Cultism Project" in December 2006 which was "aimed at making students aware of the dangers of belonging to gangs and to encourage those already involved to renounce their membership" (UN 22 Feb. 2007). However no further information on this project was found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to Roy Chikwem, a social-political activist who runs a non-profit educational foundation for Nigerian children and has written several articles related to Nigerian human rights issues, the Nigerian government has given a considerable amount of money to tertiary institutions to combat the cults (5 July 2009). However, Chikwem reports that administrators have enriched themselves with the money and students have received payments for pretending to renounce student cults (Chikwem 5 July 2009).

Universities have reportedly deployed considerable resources to campus security (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009), including the use of security forces (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; UN 22 Feb. 2007). IRIN notes that at Lagos State University, part of the security measures involve searches and strict control of access to the campus during exams (UN 22 Feb. 2007). According to *Pambazuka News*, some academic administrators are paying cults not to fight on campuses (2 July 2009). However, *The Economist* reports that while safety on university grounds has improved at Rivers State University of Science and Technology, where security measures include the use of 200 security officers plus student informants and covert surveillance, students say the violence has simply moved from the campus to the street (31 July 2008).

Culture of Impunity

Sources identify the resiliency of the cults as being due to a "culture of impunity" in Nigeria (*Daily Independent* 19 Nov 2008; UN 22 Feb. 2007). Due to influential parents and patrons intervening on their behalf, student cultists often seem above the law and are not fully prosecuted, despite evidence of their criminal activities (Aluede and Oniyama Mar. 2009; Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 6; *Daily Independent* 19 Nov. 2008; UN 22 Feb. 2007).

Powerful people are believed to use cults to further their own agendas (Chikwem 5 July 2009; *Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009). Patrons reportedly provide the cults with funding and weapons (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007; UN 22 Feb. 2007). According to reports, some of these patrons are university faculty members and administrators (*Pambazuka News* 2 July 2009; Eguavoen Sept. 2008, 1; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007).

Politicians may also support cults to intimidate opponents and further their own goals (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; Jamestown Foundation 6 July 2007; HRW Oct. 2007, 23; UN 22 Feb. 2007). According to reports, cult members have helped to manipulate elections (UN 28 Jan. 2008; HRW Oct. 2007, 25). Some politicians are members or former members of cults (*The Economist* 31 July 2008; HRW Oct. 2007, 23-25). For example, according to *The Economist*, at least 11 members of the Rivers State House of Assembly are alumni of the Vikings Confraternity cult (*The Economist* 31 July 2008).

In an October 2007 report on criminality and politics in Nigeria, Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed an anonymous Commissioner of Police from a southern Nigerian state who declared that

[o]ne should expect by now that issues like cultism should have been taken seriously, very seriously, by the government ... but the reverse appears to be the case ... From what I can gather they have accepted cultism as a normal thing that should be expected in the universities. This is in spite of the fact that some of these cultists are murderers and armed robbers and they can be recruited easily by politicians to commit violent acts-they are like a cheap market, they are there in large numbers at all times to be recruited. So there is nothing actually to deter students from continuing to enlist in these various cult groups. (HRW Oct. 2007, 48)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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