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23 February 2005

NGA43278.E

Nigeria: Societal and government reaction to student cult activities (2002 - 2004)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Historical Context

An Association of African Universities report by Sam O. Smah of the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Jos, in Nigeria, identifies 1981 as the year and the University of Lagos as the site at which the earliest known incident of cult-related violence took place (Smah May 2001, 17). The military regime of General Mohammed Buhari (Offiong 2003, 102) issued Decree No. 20 of 1984, which was amended by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1989 by Decree No. 47, to establish a special tribunal able to impose a fine of 50,000 naira [valued at CDN\$473.00 as of 23 February 2005 (Oanda 23 Feb. 2005a)] or a five-year prison term, or both to offenders (Smah May 2001, 20). Decree No. 47 in 1989 empowered school vice-chancellors to ban societies whose activities contravened the national or public interest and suspend students suspected of belonging to secret cults (ibid.). Still the problem of cult violence continued (ibid, 17-20; see also *Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004), so much so that President Olusegun Obasanjo adopted an anti-cult strategy following national outrage over the killing of five students at Obafemi Awolowo University on 10 July 1999 (*Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; *This Day* 12 July 2004; *Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004; ibid. 15 Sept. 2004; ibid. 30 Aug. 2004). Measures included ordering Vice-Chancellors to expel cult members from their schools within a specified time period (*This Day* 12 July 2004; *Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004; ibid. 30 Aug. 2004; ibid. 15 Sept. 2004) or lose their jobs (Offiong 2003, 139), offering a monetary reward to cult members who renounced their association with cults (*Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; *Daily Champion* 15 Sept. 2004; ibid. 30 Aug. 2004), and promising to establish a unit to identify cults and their activities and a database with the names of dismissed students as a way to keep them from enrolling in other schools (ibid.).

In spite of Obasanjo's seeming tough stance on cults, cult violence has worsened (ibid.; ibid. 3 Sept. 2004; *Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; *This Day* 12 July 2004; Odili 11 Aug. 2004; Moja Jan. 2000, 42; ACCORD and

UNHCR 28-29 June 2002; Smah n.d.; *ibid.* May 2001, 5-6; *Vanguard* 19 Dec. 2004). Initially, cult activity appeared to wane (*Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004; *ibid.* 30 Aug. 2004; Smah May 2001, 38), at least in the first year following Obasanjo's decree (*ibid.*; *Daily Champion* 30 Aug. 2004), as universities organized televised renunciation sessions for students who confessed to their membership in a cult (*ibid.*; Smah May 2001, 5, 13; *This Day* 24 Jan. 2005; *Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002), apologized, and proclaimed themselves born-again Christians (*ibid.*).

By all accounts, however, the federal government's efforts to eradicate cult activity, described as "inadequate" and "half-hearted" by the media (*Daily Champion* 30 Aug. 2004) and "ineffective" by a World Bank report (Moja Jan. 2000, 42), failed at stemming the tide of resurgent violence (*Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; Smah May 2001, 5). Five years after the July 1999 student killing that had prompted Obasanjo's decree, the student union at Obafemi Awolowo University condemned the federal government for not charging anyone for the murders and described cult activity as "more rampant" than in 1999 (*This Day* 12 July 2004). As recently as August 2004, Rivers state governor Peter Odili, speaking before a summit on security issues, similarly described cultism as "pervasive and endemic in Nigeria" (Odili 11 Aug. 2004).

Federal Government Action

In 2001 the House of Representatives passed the Secret Cult and Secret Society Prohibition Bill, which would make it a constitutional offence for any person to form, join, or take part in any secret cult activity and imposed a fine of 250,000 naira [valued at CDN\$2,365.44 as of 23 February 2005 (Oanda 23 Feb. 2005b)] or a prison term of from two to five years, or both (*Vanguard* 8 Feb. 2001). Apparently, the bill required Senate approval and presidential assent before it could become law (*ibid.*). In 2004 the media reported the Education Minister as saying that a blueprint for reducing cults had been sent to the universities after the Federal Executive Council had approved it (*ibid.* 19 Dec. 2004; *Daily Champion* 15 Sept. 2004).

Nevertheless, the federal government appears to have done little to follow up on Obasanjo's 1999 ultimatum (*ibid.* 3 Sept. 2004; *This Day* 12 July 2004). In 2004, the *Daily Champion* claimed that Nigerians were surprised that Obasanjo had not carried out any additional measures to curb cult activity since the 1999 decree (3 Sept. 2004) while the Obafemi Awolowo University student association went further, accusing the government of "'willfully'" encouraging cultism (*This Day* 12 July 2004). The National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) made a similar accusation when, also in 2004, the chairman of the Violent Crimes, Crises and Cultism Eradication and Management committee charged government officials with stoking the flames of cultism and even of belonging to secret cults themselves (*Daily Champion* 15 Sept. 2004; *This Day* 17 Aug. 2004). Again in 2004, NANS accused the government of "paying lip service to the fight against cultism" when the individuals who had been

apprehended for the death of 10 students in a cult-initiated brawl at the University of Ibadan were allowed to return to the school (*Daily Champion* 30 June 2004).

Calls for Government Action

The cessation of cult activities, wrote New York University professor Teboho Moja in a 2001 World Bank report, requires the "sustained attention" of government and individual institutions (Moja Jan. 2000, 42). Three years later, C. N. Achi presented a paper at the 2003 Engineering Conferences International (ECI) conference, in which he said that efforts to eradicate cults should not begin with the schools but emerge from the action of government and business leaders (ECI 2004, 2). Media such as the *Daily Champion* and the *Daily Trust* have been vocal in calling on the government to take action (*Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004; *ibid.* 30 Aug. 2004; *Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002). In 2002, for example, the *Daily Trust* suggested the government close down for two years those universities at which incidences of cult violence occurred (*ibid.*). In separate reports the *Daily Champion* urged the government to make the eradication of cult activity a priority and impose capital punishment on convicted cult members (*Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004), as well as to close up any loopholes in the law or design a law similar to that of Rivers state (*ibid.* 30 Aug. 2004).

Other voices calling on the government to act more decisively include Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, one of the original members of the Pyrates Confraternity that is said to be the progenitor of every subsequent cult (Smah May 2001, 13; Offiong 2003, 51). Along the lines of the *Daily Trust*, Soyinka has called for the closure of universities for two years as a means to resolve their problems (Smah n.d., 15), and canvassed for harsher penalties for students involved in cult activities (*Vanguard* 18 Feb. 2004). Rivers state governor Odili has also encouraged the government to follow his lead in promulgating a law and ensuring police enforce it nationwide (Odili 11 Aug. 2004).

State Government Action

Edo state appears to have been the first state to sign into law a bill banning the existence and activities of, and membership in, a secret cult when it passed the Secret Cult (Prohibition) Bill in 2000 (*This Day* 8 Dec. 2000). According to the Edo state governor, the law gave the police "sweeping powers ... including the power to 'arrest without warrant any person reasonably suspected of having committed or about to commit an offence under the law'" (*ibid.*). Two years later, in 2003, the Ebonyi state governor signed into law a bill aimed at outlawing cults and weapon possession as a means to maintain law and order and protect human rights (*ibid.* 23 Dec. 2003). The Kwara state governor followed suit in April 2004 when he signed into law a secret cult and society prohibition bill (*Daily Trust* 27 Apr. 2004), and the Enugu State Executive Council sent a bill to the House of Assembly in September 2004 that, when passed

into law, will make it a punishable offence to belong to any cult group or engage in cult activities (*Vanguard* 10 Sept. 2004). 2004 also saw Rivers state governor Odili pass the Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) Law (Odili 11 Aug. 2004). At a youth campaign focused on the dangers of cults, which was jointly organized by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Peace on Campus Initiative of Nigeria, the governor of Akwa Ibom state indicated that his government will no longer tolerate cult violence and that they will focus on the laws put forward by the House of Assembly (*This Day* 1 Feb. 2005).

Action by Universities

Following Obasanjo's decree in 1999, the government gave the universities 300 million naira [valued at CDN\$2,838,533 as of 23 February 2005 (Oanda 23 Feb. 2005c)] to carry out his order to end cult activity (*Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; see also *Daily Champion* 15 Sept. 2004). Under pressure to act quickly, the universities apparently staged the ensuing televised renunciations to, as the *Daily Champion* stated, "deceive the concerned public" (3 Sept. 2004). The *Daily Trust* accused the university authorities of pocketing the money and instructing the cultists to keep a low profile until public and government attention turned to other matters (6 Aug. 2002). Since then, some universities have reportedly expelled students for involvement in cult activities, including seven students from Ebonyi State University (*P.M. News* 25 Aug. 2004) and about 100 students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University of Awka (*This Day* 11 Dec. 2004). Over 100 students at Ambrose Alli University (*Vanguard* 29 Dec. 2004) and 19 students at Delta State University were suspended pending further investigation and the promise of expulsion if found guilty of cult membership (*This Day* 8 Feb. 2005). The governor of Bayelsa state approved the expulsion of 25 students at Niger Delta University, among which were the sons of a state commissioner and a top civil servant (*Vanguard* 22 Apr. 2004).

In spite of these efforts, however, the former vice-chancellor of the University of Ibadan, speaking at a lecture called the "Growing Menace of Cultism in Nigerian Society," describes university efforts to deal with campus cults as weak, particularly the Matriculation Oaths which failed to catch, as he stated, "the real culprits" (*Vanguard* 25 Oct. 2004). River state governor Odili admitted that school authorities suffer a lack of credibility since they are not completely free of corruption (Odili 11 Aug. 2004). Apparently, some lecturers benefit from cult activities and, as a consequence, encourage their continued existence (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Odili commended the University of Port Harcourt for publishing the names of students expelled for cult activities in the *Guardian* in July 2004, while calling on university authorities to more determinedly root out cultism (*ibid.*).

The former University of Ibadan vice-chancellor lays the blame largely on social and government practices that work against attempts to eradicate cult activity and parents who attempt to influence court-

dispensed justice (*Vanguard* 25 Oct. 2004). The *Daily Champion* has also argued that expelled students, somehow able to obtain court orders demanding their reinstatement into the school, render the universities ineffective (30 Aug. 2004). As the former vice-chancellor and others, such as Smah, and sociologist Daniel O. Offiong, seem to suggest, the practice of cult activity is a systemic problem with wide and deep roots in the larger society (*Vanguard* 25 Oct. 2004; Smah May 2001, 3, 50; Offiong 2003, 9; see also Moja Jan. 2000, 42). It is a problem, Odili says, that requires "a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach" if it is to be overcome (11 Aug. 2004).

Action by the Police

A number of media reports tell of the police arresting suspected cult members; for example, in 2003, nine suspects were arrested in Rivers state in connection with the murder of a University of Port Harcourt student (*Vanguard* 17 July 2003). In 2004, three Ilorin State Polytechnic students and one other woman were arrested for their alleged involvement in campus cult activities and on suspicion of murder (*Daily Champion* 31 Jan. 2004; *This Day* 16 Feb. 2004); thirteen suspected cult members were arrested in Enugu while at the scene of an initiation (*Vanguard* 26 Oct. 2004); twenty-nine students of Moshood Abiola Polytechnic were arrested as state police renewed efforts to curb cult activity (*This Day* 13 Dec. 2004); and at least 17 suspected cult members were arrested by townspeople of Onicha Local Government Area and handed over to the Ebonyi state police (*This Day* 6 Jan. 2005).

Police activity was also subject to calls for improvement (Odili 11 Aug. 2004; *Vanguard* 18 Aug. 2004). The *Vanguard* lauded Oyo State High Court for sentencing three students to four-year prison terms for beating a rival cult member to death and recommended police ensure investigations of cult-related complaints are effective enough to be brought to court (ibid.). In 2002, the combined ACCORD and UNHCR report predicted that police protection is likely incomplete because of the attempts of influential relatives of cult members to thwart police action (28-29 June 2002). In his speech to the summit on security issues, Odili, while calling for adequate equipment and funds with which to carry out their task, also admitted that police needed to do more to implement existing laws against cult activity (11 Aug. 2004).

Failure to Eradicate Cults

Media, academics and others provide a number of reasons explaining why it is that state and federal laws and the actions of university authorities appear to have been unsuccessful in curtailing cult activity (*African Affairs* 2003, 237; Smah May 2001, 20; Odili 11 Aug. 2004; *Vanguard* 18 Feb. 2004; *Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004; ibid. 15 Sept. 2004; *Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; *This Day* 17 Aug. 2004; ibid. 24 Jan. 2005). For example, some suggest that the parents of cult members are senior military and political figures (*African Affairs* 2003, 237), or wealthy

and influential individuals (Odili 11 Aug. 2004; *Vanguard* 18 Feb. 2004) who supply the cults with weapons (*Daily Champion* 3 Sept. 2004). Government and other high-ranking individuals have been accused of either belonging to cults or supporting them for their own gain (ibid.; ibid. 15 Sept. 2004; *Daily Trust* 6 Aug. 2002; Odili 11 Aug. 2004; *This Day* 17 Aug. 2004); NANS has charged politicians with providing cult members with their arms and ammunition (ibid). Soyinka argues that traditional rulers sometimes protect students caught in cult activities from justice (*Vanguard* 18 Feb. 2004). Others have taken the courts to task for failing or refusing to convict students alleged to be guilty of cult activity (*This Day* 24 Jan. 2005). Law courts are apparently unable to enforce penalties because the law does not clearly define the nature of a secret cult (Smah May 2001, 20). Finally poor funding, exploding university enrolment, inadequate building and equipment (ibid., 46) and poor living conditions plague universities and fuel students' anger and discontent (ibid., 48; *Daily Champion* 5 Aug. 2004).

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 additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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