

Cultism, Ungovernable Space, and Rural Development in Rivers State, Nigeria, 2010 -2019

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Abstract

The study examined the activities of cult groups in some parts of Rivers State and its impact on rural development using three selected local government areas (Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni) from each senatorial district in the state. Recently, the rising wave of cult rivalries has become unimaginable in the Rivers State, particularly in the rural parts of the state. Cult rivalries have led to forced migration by the inhabitants, destruction of lives and properties. The cult war has created ungoverned space, therefore, reducing rural developments in the affected communities. The study aimed at unraveling what occasioned the emergence and spread of cultism in Rivers State, and its effects on rural development in the affected communities. The paper adopted the classical strain theory as its theoretical construct. To achieve this aim, the study adopted a triangulation method of data gathering techniques. The study unravelled that the growth of cultism in Rivers State is sustained by their patrons in government or government associates. The paper recommends amongst others the provision of employment as a means of restoring peace and stability in the affected areas.

Keywords: *cultism, insecurity, patrons, rural development, ungovernable space.*

INTRODUCTION

Criminal activities occasioned by cultism are not limited to Rivers State, Nigeria. Cultism has become a universal phenomenon. It exists both in underdeveloped and developed countries. In

some countries, they are known as peer groups, organized crimes, and street gangs groups, among others. For instance, Howell and Moore (2010, p.2) disclosed that:

The first gang-like groups began to emerge immediately after the American Revolution ended in 1783, but they were not seasoned criminals; only youth fighting over local turf. The beginning of serious ganging in New York City would commence a few years later, around 1820, in the wake of far more large-scale immigration. The gangs that emerged from this melting pot were far more structured and dangerous. The third wave of gang activity developed in the 1950s and 1960s when Latino and black populations arrived en masse.

Most gang groups metamorphosed to cult organizations with a strong network as the case in Rivers State. They engage in nefarious activities against their rival members and innocent citizens in their area of existence. Cult members are young people who are knitted for antisocial behaviour, criminal activities, among others. Hence, Ajayi (2015) cited in Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015, p.222) viewed cultism “as a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission, policy and initiation formalities” are unknown. Their modus operandi is done in secret and kept secret by their members. Oruwari and Owei. (2006,p.5) revealed that:

Historically, cults in Nigeria were for the adults in the communities and they were part of the traditional religious systems. Although their activities were enshrined in secrecy, the members were known and revered by everyone in the communities, e.g.the Owegbe cult of the Benin kingdom and the Ogboni cult of the Yoruba land. These secret associations still exist and are powerful in assisting their members to gain political, social, and economic recognition in the country.

Similarly in Rivers State, before the emergence of the present cult groups, there were traditional cult groups like Oboni, amanikpo, Nwantam, among others in various ethnic extractions. At the same vein, before Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, violent criminal gangs in the city of Port Harcourt. These gangs were known and called *Panikers*. They were limited to their areas. They install fears on their victims for sexual or economic gains. However, as the number of dropouts from universities who were members of confraternity increased in the late 1990s and 2000s, they resorted to re-establishing cultism in Port Harcourt City. Rivers State became a hotbed for the recruitment of cult organizations. Agbedo (2019) revealed that “there are over 50 cult groups in existence in Rivers State, the Deybam, Deywell/Iceland and Greenlander have been blamed for some of the notorious violence recorded in the state of late.”

Initially, the essence of forming local gang groups was to facilitate local drug peddling, which was aimed at making money. Over time, these groups began to contend over who controls drug business in the city of Port Harcourt, particularly in Diobu, Abonnema Wharf, and Port Harcourt Township. This collaborated with Rabasa, Boraz, Chalk, Cragin, Karasik, Moroney, O’Brien, and Peters (2007, p.245) assertion that the drug traffickers fight themselves, “as they vie for control of drug processing centers and transit routes that are used to smuggle drugs, weapons, and gasoline to support their respective agendas.” However, in 2003, these cult groups were integrated into the political landscape in Rivers State. Shaxson (2007, p.200) cited in Ogele (2020, p.8) noted that:

It was ahead of the next election in 2003, once civilian politics were properly embedded, what matters began to run out of control. In the run-up to those elections, Peter Odili, the wealthy and flamboyant governor of Rivers State and one President Obasanjo’s strongest supporter, employed Asari to intimidate opponents. Asari eventually split with Odili, and his men fought a bloody battle with the Niger Delta Vigilante, another militia led by the feared warlord Ateke Tom.

These two groups later fell apart; hence, contentions between these groups created chaos and have continued to date with their affiliates in other parts of Port Harcourt City, suburbs, and Rivers State large. Oruwari and Owei (2006,p.7) disclosed that:

No one who knows the extreme cases of violence associated with the two groups can deny this tag. The rivalry between them holds parts of the Rivers State and Port Harcourt under siege for months. Although both leaders claim to have a liberation agenda and claim to protect the interests of their communities, the Rivers State and (in the case of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force) the interest of the Niger Delta region, the rivalry is about territory, and territorial claims.

The quest to conquer new space led to the spread of cult groups in Rivers State. The politicians took advantage of the division and began to empower one group against the other. Afterward, the leaders of various cult organizations began to gain prominence in the political space in Rivers State. They became willing-tools for the power elites. However, the power elites lost control of their boys occasioned by the inability to fulfill election bargains. The power elites could not retrieve the firearms released to them. Port Harcourt was almost thrown into anarchy. Consequently, in 2004, Dr. Peter Odili signed into law the Rivers State Government on the prohibition of secret cult and related matters. According to the law prohibiting secret cult "any person who is a member of a secret cult ... whether or not the person is in control of an offensive weapon ... is liable on conviction to imprisonment for ten years without an option of fine"(Onah, 2007). The aborted six months regime of Sir Celestine Omahia in 2007 witnessed an intensified warfare between the federal troop and cult members in three days after the gang kidnapped his mother.

At present, Rivers State has witnessed a rising wave of cult conflicts leading to scores of death, destruction of properties in the Rivers State. Poroma, Kpaa, and Abel (2018, p.76) noted that "this development has equally degenerated to the suburbs of the State, to the extent that different parts of the State have been bedeviled by different types of arm conflict. In recent times, the use of arms has fueled crisis and insecurity in Omoku, Ahoada, Ogbakiri, Rumuekpe, and Ogoniland." The Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area is the worst hit in terms of the cult-related war in Rivers State. Ogba clan was turned ungovernable because of the cult war between Icelanders and New Greenlanders. The communities in and around Ogba were sacked and scores of deaths and destruction of properties worth millions were recorded. For instance, on September 25th, 2015, two communities (Omoku and Obrikom) in Ogba became "ghost towns as residents have fled for safety from a cult clash which... lasted for two days...seven persons were... shot dead in Omoku and six in Obrikom"(Channels Television, 2015). Similarly, the killing of 16 people by gunmen in the early hours of the New Year in 2018 while returning from church service was attributed to cult war (BBC, 2018). Amnesty International (2020) reported that "at least 60 people were killed in 2019 alone in various communities of Rivers state, especially; Khana and Gokana local government areas."

On several occasions, these cult groups have engaged security agents in gun battle leading to casualties recorded on both sides. Sadly, the security agents over time have been borderless over the maintenance of peace and order, which ought to be their statutory obligations. The major challenge which has contributed to the spread of cultism in Rivers State is the backing or patronage they receive from the political class. For instance, whenever these cult boys are arrested for a criminal offence, their patron calls for their release. The cult leaders (overlord) control the activities in these deserted communities. The government's primary and secondary schools, markets, skills acquisition centres, electricity projects, among others are in deplorable conditions occasioned by lack of maintenance by the local and state governments.

The essence of the establishment of the local government council is to oversee and facilitate rural development in the grassroots; however, this statutory obligation has not been neglected in these conflict-ridden communities. Appadorai (1975) cited in Lawal (2014,p.142) observed

that “there are problems that are local in nature and such problems are better handled by local government because they are better understood by the local people themselves.” The lack of government presence or inaction of the security agent’s provides grounds for the cultism to expand her membership, dominate, and strive for the contestation of supremacy, which invariably creates ungovernable space referred to as ‘our ground’.

At present, these violent cult groups have established their cells in all parts of Rivers State. Their networks are very strong and leadership centralized. Stubbs (2017) revealed that “conflict and violence force people out of their communities, leaving them without resources or means to start afresh. They stall the lives of millions of people, depriving adults of their dignity and children of their childhood.” Empirical evidence has proven that some of these cult-related conflicts are prompted by resource competition, chieftaincy wrangling, contestation for supremacy by cult groups, political competition, among others.

The cult-related conflicts have continued to soar in Rivers State. In 2016, Chief Nyesom Wike, the Executive Governor to Rivers State offered Amnesty to cultist in the state. Most of them surrendered their arms and vowed not to go back to their various cult groups. Sadly, the situation is still unabated. Hence, in 2018, Chief Nyesom Wike signed a law prohibiting Secret Cult and Similar Activities No.6 to eradicate secret cult activities in the state. Despite these extant laws, the wave of cultism has continued to soar in Rivers State. “Law enforcement is dysfunctional” (Rabasa et al, 2007,p.232). The government lacks the political will to tackle cultism. At present, there is a wave of relative peace in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area through the efforts of a vigilante group known Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Security Planning and Advisory Committee (OSPAC), a local community-based security outfit. Hence, most affected communities in Emohua local government area have resorted to self-help by employing as OSPEC to assist in the restoration of peace and order. Against this background, the study interrogates the circumstances that led to youth’s involvement in cultism, why cult activities have escalated in Rivers State and its effects on rural development.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Classical Strain Theory as its theoretical construct. The classical strain theory was developed by Robert K. Merton in 1938. It is a popular theory in criminology. Merton asserts that “all people in the United States are encouraged to strive for the cultural goal of monetary success” (Jang and Agnew, 2015, p.495). Marton further argued that “lower-class individuals, however, are often prevented from achieving this goal through legitimate means.” This is based on the fact that individual parents may not have the capacity to provide their wards with the skills and attitude required for school success. They may reside in neighbourhood with inferior schools, and their parents are often financially endowed to send them to college or set them up in business (Jang and Agnew, 2015, p.495). Hence, the lower class individual prone to desperation occasioned by a disjunction between their aims and legitimate means of actualizing them. Marton disclosed that there are various ways to survive with this strain such as involvement in a crime. Marton (1938) cited in Jang and Agnew (2015,p.495) revealed that individuals strive to gain monetary success through illegitimate ways. They include drug selling, theft, prostitution, among others. They may strike out at others in their frustration. They may engage in drug use to alleviate their frustration. Sometimes, they might reject the goals of financial gains and focus on the success of other goals, which is certainly a crime.

Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen (2002) cited in UKEssays(2018) suggested that “it is personality traits within the individual that result in their reaction to strain, and it is then these certain traits that end up in the individual turning towards delinquency and crime as a way to relieve the tension that the strain has brought into their life.” This is viewed from the perspective that individuals high in adverse emotionality and low in limitations are not pleasant

people; hence, prone to elicit negative reactions from people in particular situations; change their environments in ways that increase the likelihood of negative treatment” (Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002,p.47). Furthermore, Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen (2002, p.44) posited that several factors are involved in the effects of strain delinquency. Such factors include the importance attached to the goals, values, or identities that are threatened; coping skills; coping resources like money, self-esteem, and self-efficacy; conventional social supports; a level of social control: and association with delinquent peers.

Linking the classical strain theory to this study is anchored on several factors that led to the emergence and spread of cultism in Rivers State. The majority of those who are engaged in the local cult activities are young people who are from a humble background; whose parents lack the means of seeing them through their academics or skill acquisitions. Hence, these young turn to social deviants in society through involvement in street gangs, drug trafficking, armed robbery, theft, and other social vices. The climax of the relationship with other young people with similar situation strengthened the stronghold locally based cultism in various parts of Rivers State. Though cult activities in Rivers State were initially tied Niger Delta struggle against the oil companies in their early days but metamorphosed into militancy and now cultism. Sadly, desperate political power patrons used these cult groups and rewarded them with government appointments, contracts, even traditional stools, among others. Hence, the engagement of cult groups in the political process has become a political culture in Rivers State. At present, this acceptability by the power elites has resulted in contestation for supremacy in ungovernable space in various parts of Rivers State, hence, impeded rural development.

Cultism, Ungovernable Space, and Rural Development

The term “cultism” is rooted in the word “cult”. A cult is an extreme religious sect that is not part of established religion. “It is a fashionable belief, idea, or attitude that influences people’s lives. In other words, cultism initially originated from the activities and beliefs of the devotees or followers in the worship of gods. Over time, the term has embraced other focus which youths regard as fashionable ideas, worthy of pursuing as the basis for coexistence among group members”(NISER,2005,p.6). The violent secret cultism first operated in the Nigerian Universities before it was established at the large societies. Thomas (2002) noted that “confraternities operated at no degree of violence when they emerged in the 1950s.” Sadly, the military government that lacked legitimacy hijacked the groups to consolidate their holds on university students who might intend to challenge authorities. This is based on the fact that the “secret cults were used to neutralize student unions and their “anti-government activities”, especially those which questioned or challenged the authorities of military dictatorship” (Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi, 2015, p.222). Oyegoke (2003) further noted that “what originally was designed to be a positive force or pressure group later turned out to be an instrument of intimidation, extortion, undue influence, and political brigandage.”

Adewale (2005) maintained that cultism is the byproduct of years of the military regime in Nigeria and the attendant culture of the establishment of violence. The emergence of military rule in Nigeria coincided with the transformation of the original Pyrates confraternity to secret cults in Nigerian universities. Sadly, the eradication of secret cult in tertiary institutions in Nigeria has been unsuccessful despite government commitments at all levels. The major challenge is that cultism has gone beyond campus menace, and have taken root and spread in the large societies as have experienced in the Niger Delta region and Rivers State in particular in the last two decades. It has adversely impacted on the socioeconomic and democratic development in Rivers State. In the report of the study carried out by PIND (2015) revealed that cult violence is on the rising rate in the Niger Delta since 2014. The report revealed that

the fourth realm has been salient on the nefarious activities of cultism in Rivers State. The State Commissioner of Police, Chris Ezike, in 2015 stated that:

...The police need to do more to prevent crimes, even as he has launched a one-month emergency action against violent crime in the state. Amid criticism that security agents and government have not dealt with the menace head-on, the Police chief, last week, said the State Command arrested 74 cultists: 30 (Deygbam), 17 (Deywell), 26 (Iceland), one (Vikings), including a witch doctor who makes charms for them...Offensive weapons and other exhibits recovered from them include, one AK 47 rifle, one pump action gun, three locally made guns, axe, 12 motorcycles and one car (Ebiri, 2015)

The concept of 'ungoverned space' constitutes a major discourse in global security studies. Piombo (2007) and Hazen (2010) cited in Raleigh and Dowd (2013,p.1) posit that the ungoverned space intended to refer to both physical territory and non-physical policy space in which there is no appearance of the effectiveness of state sovereignty and control. The situation in some parts of Rivers State presents a feature of failing or failed state. Rabasa et al (2007,p.xv) defined an ungoverned space "as an area in which a state faces significant challenges in establishing control." Similarly, Raleigh and Dowd (2013,p.9) defined 'ungoverned' spaces as territories of government where there is no statecraft appearance and high level of state involvement in conflict activity in the supposedly lawless areas.

Raleigh and Dowd (2013,p.2) argued that ungovernable space' maintain state-centric tenets of governance and conflict, which suggest that in the first instance, that such spaces are devoid of state presence. The second instance, "that such absence results in a lack of any effective governance, and therefore conflict" (Raleigh and Dowd, 2013,p.2).

The Ungovernability implies that "the state is unable or unwilling to perform its functions" (Rabasa et al, 2007,p.xv). Kilcullen (2004) disclosed that in ungoverned space, the state is not the main source of authority. The state is just other social institutions such as tribes and clans to be seen as legitimate or to be able to stimulate compliance with its laws (Kilcullen, 2004). The state co-exists with other actors functioning within the environment. It is the "survival of the fittest" dynamic which emerges (Kilcullen, 2004). Raineri (2016,p.17) claimed that "ungoverned spaces unavoidably bring about instability, both locally and internationally, is linked to the idea that some places are inherently conflict-prone, and therefore represent a threat to international security."

It is imperative to note that the ungoverned space is usually associated very difficult terrain where maintains, jungles, desert, swamp, among others just like some parts of Rivers State, Nigeria. As an indication of ungovernable space, some parts of Rivers State are economically marginal with a limited population-associated with conditions that impede economic development and reduces the state's incentives to advance the social amenities needed for a robust state presence. The cult groups use cell phones and take advantage of weak administrative structures to aggravate governability challenges.

One of the challenges that promote ungovernable space is endemic corruption. Prevalent corruption among the statecraft delegitimizes the state, and most times might have severe security consequences on the citizens. In Nigeria, the federal allocation and internally generated revenue have no impact on the masses because of endemic corruption. Hence, these affected communities are underdeveloped. Even the development agents are willing to make a positive impact; the cult war keeps them away from these communities. Atkinson(2017,p.1) described rural development as efforts involves "that are economic and social in nature intended to encourage concepts of retention, growth, and expansion in areas outside cities, including improving quality of life for rural residents through such activity." Atkinson further disclosed that "rural can be taken to mean from or of open areas—those outside cities. Rural has a common strand of meaning with country or countryside but is more frequently encountered

with such nomenclature in public policy. Rural, as a word, is also endowed with other sorts of value: it is associated with agriculture and farming and people from outside city areas. Connections are made between people from rural areas and the land itself” (Atkinson, 2017,p.1). The affected communities are rural; they depend on agriculture and fishing as their vocation and sources of livelihood. The inability to get protection from the government has propelled some of the affected communities to opt for self-help rather than rely on the statecraft to continue to provide security for them. The cult conflict will adversely impact on the rural development because some development agents are mindful of crisis-ridden areas. Hence, the cult groups oversee, control, or influence local government areas through threats and intimidation of local officials who may come to carry out their statutory obligation (Rabasa et al, 2007,p.248).

Synopsis of cultism in Rivers State

Several articles have attempted to trace the emergence of cultism in Rivers State. Hence, there are various versions or perceptions of the origin of cultism in Port Harcourt. Cultism is has been in existence, although their activities were limited to mere intimidation, attacks with knives, among others to install fears on their vulnerable or victims. They were referred to as Panikers in the 1980s. They were common in Diobu axis, D/Line, Port Harcourt Township, and Ogburnabali axis, although their modus Operandi were fashioned like the present cultism. These groups control their areas of existence and do not tolerate incursion from other groups. However, at the dawn of the 1990s, drug trafficking increased in Port Harcourt. The drug businesses were coordinated by university dropouts from the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, University of Calabar, University of Uyo, among others who were members of university confraternities before they dropped out of university. Drug trafficking became their means of sustenance because they cannot go back home or will they let their sponsors know their predicaments. There were two known groups, the Germans fold formed by the Supreme Vikings Confraternity undergraduate dropouts from the University of Port Harcourt, University of Calabar, and Rivers State University while the Ku Klux Klans (KKK) were dropouts from the University of Uyo, but recruited more from college students in Port Harcourt Township, especially from Baptise High school, Port Harcourt. The fragmentation started when the Klans Confraternity formed Deybam cult as local or street wing in Port Harcourt. In response, the Supreme Vikings Confraternity formed the Junior Vikings Confraternity (JVC). The ineffectiveness of the JVC propelled the formation of Deywell by the Supreme Vikings Confraternity. To further strengthen the Deywell and JVC, the Icelander was formed at Okirika. The Greenlanders are the splinter cult groups from the Icelanders. However, in 2003, the Greenlanders broke away in Okirika. Thereafter, there have been various splinter groups operating in all parts of Rivers State.

These groups became rivals over who controls drug business space in Port Harcourt. These university dropouts also recruited idle youths who were young secondary school leavers and secondary school dropouts for drug trafficking too. The drug trafficking was along Diobu, Abonnema wharf, and Port Harcourt Township. Whenever they had inherent irreconcilable issues, they were settled by the drug baron who resides in Lagos State. Coincidentally, this was the period of the Niger Delta youth’s agitation for resource control, particularly among Ijaw Youth Congress. They were referred to as the ‘Vigilante Groups’. In the build-up of 2003 general elections, these young people were ushered into the political space by desperate politicians in Rivers State. As usual, the use and dump; and divide and rule strategies of Nigerian politicians were what led to the expansion of cult groups and the present predicament the state is facing. The arms and ammunition deployed to these boys during the elections were not retrieved; hence, the boys used it for other nefarious activities such as armed robbery, kidnap for ransom, assassination, among others. The power elites in government began to back some of the overlords against the other. The overlord went into oil theft and young men who were paid ten thousand naira each for involvements in oil theft. Becoming a local cult member became a more profitable venture for Rivers youths in Diobu, Okirika, Kababari, Port Harcourt Township, Ogbakiri, Ogoni axis, Marine base, Bundu Watersides, Abuja Waterside, among others. The security agents were handicapped because whenever the cult boys are arrested for a criminal

offense, phone calls come from highly placed politicians, and they are released without trial. These cult leaders are rewarded with government appointments such as local government caretaker chairman and members, chieftaincy titles, elective positions, among others. Hence, the cult groups grew in numbers, strength, and expanded to all parts of the states. This political reward ignited fragmentations among cult leaders, every one of them wants to be overlord, and aspire to gain recognition by any patron in government. Hence, there was competition among them; each fighting to control space (ground) in the state. During the Amnesty Proclamation in 2009, most of these cult members disguised as agitators and were offered amnesty without disconnecting from the membership of their various cult groups. Thereafter, they continued with their cult activities. Sadly, most of these cult members have been rewarded with elective positions, government appointments, and traditional leadership positions of authorities and influence, among others in Rivers State. Today, Rivers State is turned to Rivers of blood. Youths are killed and beheaded in scores. Communities in some parts of the state are sacked daily.

Command Structure

The command structure is likened to university confraternities since most of their founding leaders are university dropouts. The chain of command is central in a top-down arrangement. Orders come from the highest authority at the command to the list unit coordinators. Though, their name varies from one group to the other. Each chapter is referred to as Deck. The chain of command order includes:

Skull Executioner, Anchor Head, and Point one - the nomenclature is based on each cult group: Their names may differ but they play the same role in the chain of command. The head of the cult group enjoys absolute power. The power and authority rest on his shoulder. He can take eliminate and save in the group. He can declare war on other groups. He can condemn or punish airing members

Strike Group: The strike group is headed by strike chief. He is the hitman. He carries out and coordinates all the hits for his group. They are seen as the strongest group in the hierarchy in the chain of command. Hence, whenever there is an abuse of power by the Point One, he is the one that leads the mutiny against the Point One, which is usually death (thrown overboard as referred) or absolute surrender of his power. Hence, the Point One always watching the strike chief and ensures intelligence gathering on him. Sadly, if his mutiny plot is discovered or fails, it is a death sentence without mercy. The skull has the power to order his removal, though usually not a smooth one, most times, they fall them.

Intelligent Group: The intelligent group is headed by the intelligent chief whose main function is intelligence gathering. He sources information through various means, particularly on what is happening in the rival camps. He noses around for opportunities to raise funds.

Dorfman: The word is derived from German language meaning Village. Since the cult members refer themselves as the Germans, the word Dorfman is referred to as a village man in charge of the finance of the cult group. Dorfman is vested with the responsibility of collecting dues, levies, and other contributions to the members. Refusal of payment attracts punishment. He keeps all the monies or treasures for the group. The Dorfman is respected in the fold, usually, a calm guy who is relatively honest and endowed with skills that can persuade airing members to pay their dues.

Axeman: The axeman is the head of amouries. He procures arms or weapons from the blacksmith or disgruntled security agents.

Unit coordinators: The Unit is the smallest in the cult organogram. The Units coordinators are vested with the responsibilities ensuring the protection of members and stability in the organization transmit intelligent information to the top, collects dues and levies, carryout local hit against the rival groups, among others.

Mode of Recruitments

The mode of recruit is usually through voluntary by young who aspire to be a strong man or who is threatened by members of a cult group in situations such as inability to protect himself and his girlfriend, enjoy partying, among others. Sometimes, the members also tap those they believe have the capacity to strengthen their existence in their immediate environment. The cult members also recruit through persuasion. They persuade their peers to join them. They capture and initiate them against their will. The Hard Truth Newspaper (2005) a Port Harcourt based newspaper revealed that “children were captured in the presence of their helpless parents and taken away to be initiated into cultism and anyone who refused was killed and the police were helpless because calls would come from high authorities ordering the police to release them (the cultists) when arrested... Cultists set up their cells in [all parts of the state] and operated freely.” The initiations are carried out at the bush, sea banks, anywhere that is conducive for the process.

Source of Funding

Fundings of cult groups in Rivers State comes from different sources. They include extortion of money from the vulnerable, particularly the traders; protection money, political patronage, donation, armed robbery, oil theft, artisanal refinery, sale of drugs, royalties, mercenaries, Prostitutes are made to buy "landing rights", looting of homes, Landlords utilize the services of cultist to forcefully evict tenants.

Area of Study

Rivers State is among the 36 states in Nigeria. Rivers State came into existence under Decree No. 14 of 1967 by the General Yakubu Gowon administration on the 27th of May 1967. The state was made up of provinces from the former eastern region of Nigeria. Rivers State has a total area of 11,077 km^2 (4,277 mi^2), with the population an estimated population of 7,043,800 people in 2015 (<https://www.citypopulation.de/php/nigeria-admin>). Rivers State is located in the delta region (South-South Zone) of Southern Nigeria. Rivers State is constrained on the North by Anambra, Imo, and the Abia States; the South by the Atlantic Ocean, the West by Bayelsa and Delta States; and the East by Akwa Ibom State. Rivers State has a topography of the fairly flat plain caught in a web of 72 rivers, creeks, and tributaries, creating what Okonny (2002, p.18) denotes to it as ‘a water environment’. Foremost of these rivers include New Calabar, Orashi, Bonny, Sombreiro, St. Bartholomew and Santa Barbara. There exists a balance between the sea and the land as Okonny (2002) noted that “the sea is either gaining on the landmass or the land is gaining on the sea.”

There are three different and broadly similar geomorphologic and Geotechnical zones. The zones include Saltwater/Fresh Water Transitional and Freshwater Upland Saltwater (marine) Coastal. These zones constitute the major environmental zones of the Eastern Niger Delta (Bell-Gam, 2002). The monthly rainfall in Rivers State is almost expectable and follows a temporal order to rise toward July-August before reducing in the dry season months of November – February. Oyegun and Ologunorisa (2002, p.57) noted that “the weather and climate of Rivers State is a function of its geographical location within the humid tropical environment, the short distance away from the Atlantic Ocean, the urban factor of pollution and the prevailing Tropical Maritime (TM) air mass which blows over the state at different times of the year.”

The Rivers economy is divided into two with the Upland areas produces ‘food-basket’ in the state while the Riverine areas constitute the ‘fish-basket’. Other traditional occupations in Rivers State include canoe carving, craftwork, and trading (Ayolagha and Onuegbu, 2002, p.39). Rivers State has a “high concentration of marine and forest resources that are sources of food, medicines, and shelter and industrial raw materials” (Nyanayo, 2002, p.68). At present,

Rivers State is one of the oil and gas-bearing states of Nigeria. Rivers State is among the states in the Niger Delta region that has highly concentrated drilling and oil production activities. The state is the heart of Nigeria's hydrocarbon industry and is responsible for over 48 percent of crude oil produced onshore, and almost 100 percent of the gas currently being exported to several countries in liquid form" (Rivers State Government Bulletin, 2003). The map of Rivers State indicates below:



Fig.1. Map of Rivers State Showing Local Government Area

Source:https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Rivers-State-Showing-Local-Government-Area_fig1_

Research Methodology

The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population of the study covers the three senatorial districts- Rivers State- Rivers East, Rivers South East, and Rivers West. Rivers West-Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government; Rivers South East-Khana local government area, and Rivers East-Emohua local government area. The affected communities in these three local government areas- Emohua – Rumuekpe, Obelle, Ibaa, and Odogu 1&2; Khana - Zakpor, Yeghe, Eeken, Gwara, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni- Ogba represents the population of the study. A total of 300 questionnaires were administered among the respondents in the affected communities, out of which 260 were retrieved and used for analysis. Though the inability to retrieve some of the questionnaires was as result intensified degree of insecurity in these communities, however, eighty-six percent of the total questionnaires retrieved represent the validity of the study. The questionnaire and interview are focused on obtaining the perceptions and opinions of different people such as ordinary youths, women, local elites, among others about the source of conflicts, the nature of the conflicts, and its effects on rural development in the affected communities. For security reasons, all the names and particulars of the interviewee are anonymous. The questionnaire's graphic method of data presentation as shown below:

Table1: Questionnaire Distribution

| Selected governments areas in Rivers State | local areas in | Issued Questionnaire | Returned Questionnaire | Percentage |
|--|----------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Emohua | | 100 | 90 | 35 |
| Khana | | 100 | 83 | 32 |
| Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni | | 100 | 87 | 33 |
| Total | | 300 | 260 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Profile of the respondents

Based on this, the demographic data were presented and analyzed. The details of the academic qualifications of the respondents were shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Questionnaire Distribution

| Qualification | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Primary Six | 57 | 22 |
| WAEC/SSCE/ Equiv. | 119 | 46 |
| NCE/OND/Equiv | 38 | 14 |
| BSc/BA/HND | 25 | 10 |
| MSc/MA/Equiv | 5 | 2 |
| PhD | - | - |
| Others | 16 | 6 |
| Total | 260 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Similarly, forty-five persons comprised of elders, youths, and women were interviewed. They include ten men and twenty-five youths, and ten women who are inhabitants of the affected communities in Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. Though, some of the interviewed pleaded to be anonymous. All the interviewees were selected through random sampling.

Reasons deduced for joining cultism

The bar chart below shows the response generated from the seventh question on the questionnaire that sought to find out the reasons behind youths joining local cult groups in affected communities in Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. The responses indicated as follows: 21 % economic gains, 18% unemployment, 15 % peer group influence, 12% revenge bid, 19% protection from intimidation, 9% inferiority complex, 4% frustration, 2% initiation against your will, while 0% none of the above. Based on the responses, the involvement of cultism is a conscious act as indicated in the table and column chart below.

Table3: Indicate the reasons for joining a cult group in Rivers State

| S/N | Reasons for joining a cult group | frequency | Percentage |
|-----|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Economic gains | 75 | 21 |
| 2 | Unemployment | 64 | 18 |
| 3 | Peer group influence | 53 | 15 |
| 4 | Revenge bid | 43 | 12 |
| 5 | Protection from intimidation | 67 | 19 |
| 6 | Inferiority complex | 34 | 9 |
| 7 | Frustration | 15 | 4 |
| 8 | Initiation against your will | 7 | 2 |
| 9 | None of the above | 2 | 0 |
| | Total | 360 | 100 |

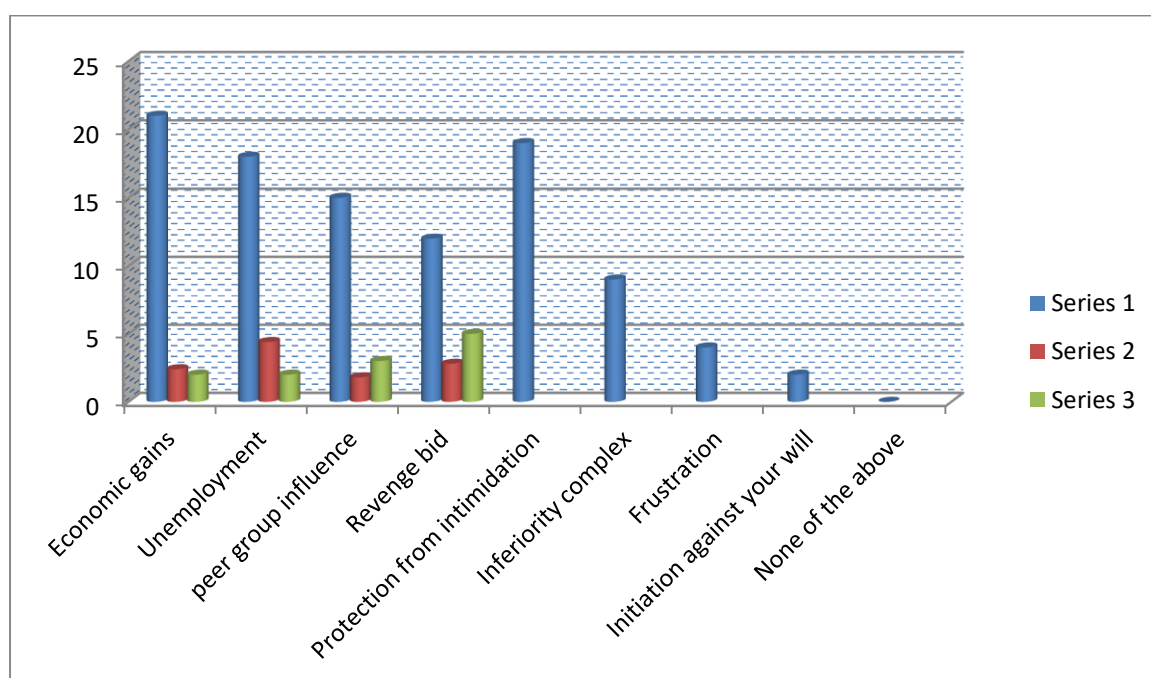


Fig. 2. Showing the reasons for joining a cult group in Rivers State
 Source: Field Survey 2020

One of the respondents during the interview when asked what propelled him to join a cult group? He revealed that:

I am a repented cultist and was lucky to be alive. It is a very dangerous adventure. I was invited to my friend to a party, which I obliged but was shocked when the party turned to initiation. I was beaten and compelled to drink a substance. Thereafter, the Oye Nmoor (Priest) administered the oath in the presence of the Point One. I was promised so many things such as protection from attacks, financial gains, among others. They also told me that prominent men in government are their members. So there was to fear anything. When I returned home, I was afraid to inform of my parents my encounter. They keep threatening me that if I divulge or reveal what I went through, I will die. But thank God I am free at last.

Another respondent disclosed that, although he is now born again. He became a member because of constant harassment and intimidation from his peers. They always embarrass him,

especially when they see him with his girlfriend. Until his friend took him with a bottle of Squadron hot drink to the Anchorman, who assured him of protection if he joins them. He has no option than to join.

Reasons deduced for the increase in cult activities

The pie chart below shows the response generated from the eightieth question on the questionnaire that sought to find out what led to the increase of cult activities in the affected communities in Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. The responses are indicated as follows: 60 % political patronage, 20% weak institution, 15 % arms proliferation, while 5% weak traditional institutions. Based on the responses, a greater percentage was affirmative that political patronage contributed to the spread of cultism in the affected communities.

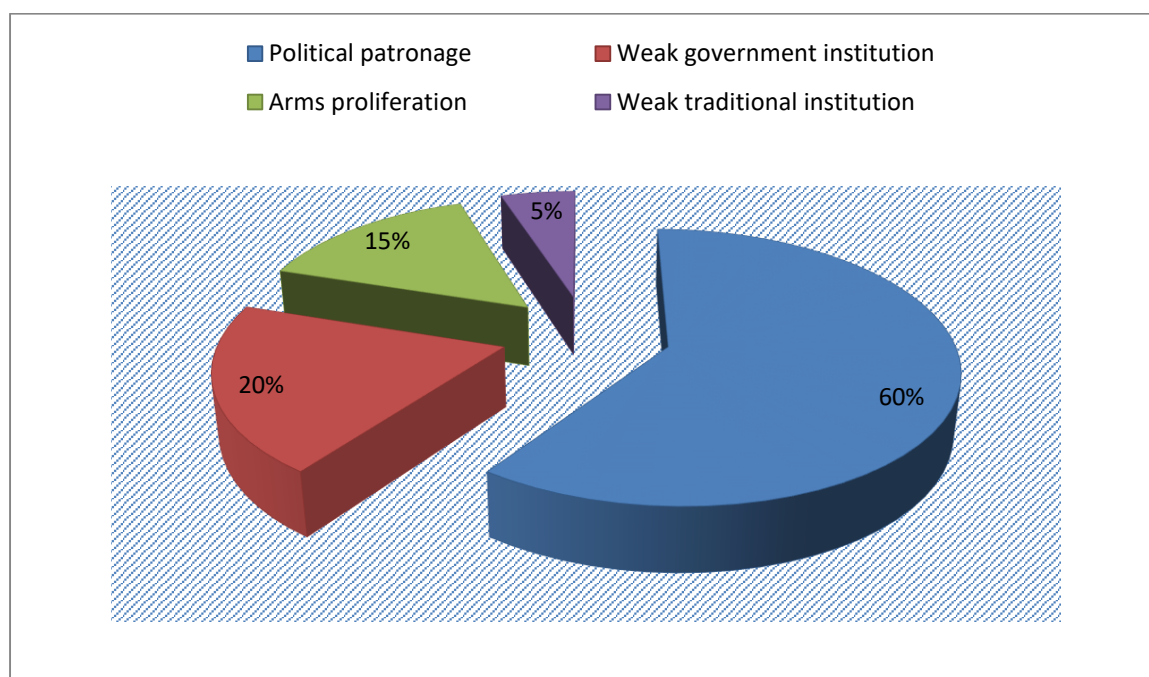


Fig. 3: indicating the reasons deduced for the increase in cult activities
Source: Field Survey 2020

One of the respondents interviewed boasted that when he was a system man, nobody can arrest him. In fact, in our group, you cannot keep us in the police station in two hours without a call coming from the high places. The police will quickly release you with respect, especially if it is “your ground”. When asked what do you refer to as ground. He answered that; a ground means your jurisdiction. No other group can contend with you.

Effects of cult conflicts on rural development

The bar chart below shows the response generated from the eleventh question on the questionnaire that sought to find out if cult conflict impacts negatively on rural development in the affected communities in Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. The responses are indicated as follows: 80 % affirmative, 17% agreed, while 3% no response. Based on the responses, an overwhelming percentage was affirmative that cult conflicts impact negatively on rural development in those affected communities in Emohua local government area, Rivers State.

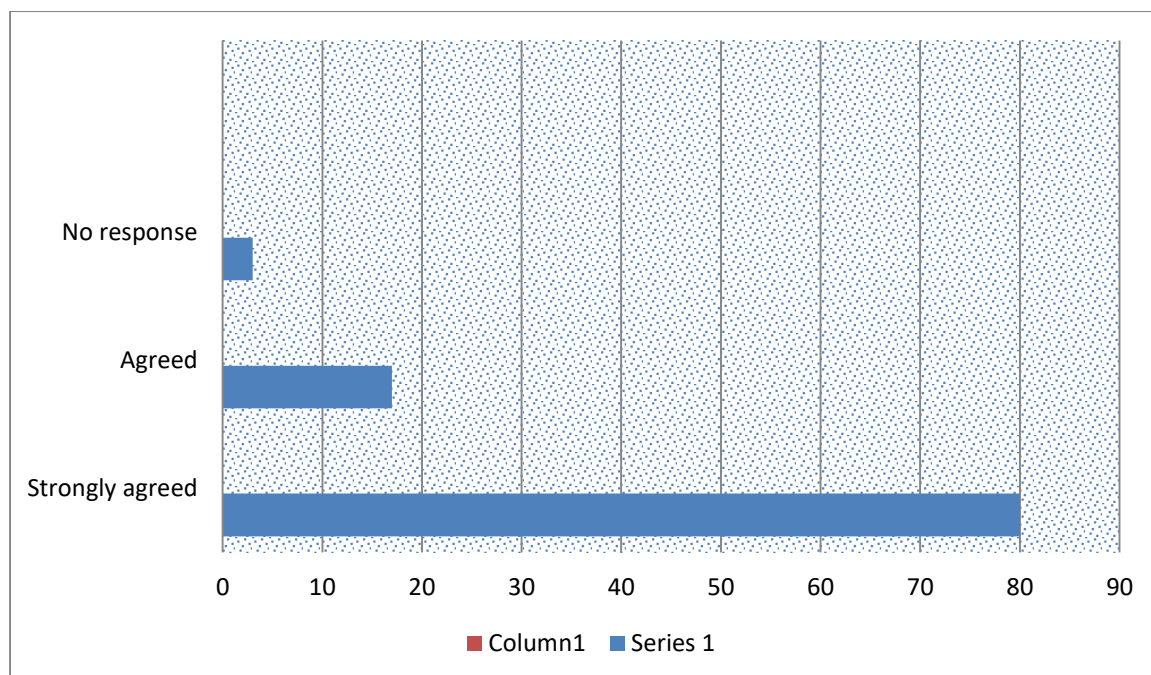


Fig. 4. Showing the response on the effects of cult conflict on rural development
Source: Field Survey 2020

One of the elderly respondents interviewed disclosed that the negative effects of cultism are enormous, hence, should not be taken for granted. He elderly who hail from Obelle community in Emohua local government area claimed that for many months, he has not visited home. The youths are killing themselves and burning down houses. The man wondered what will be the faith of their children in the future. He revealed that all the social amenities are in deplorable conditions. The primary and secondary schools have abandoned for years. The community market is gone. There is no government presence. The police visit once or twice in a week, and can they do when the boys stay in the bush.

Discussion of Findings

Reasons deduced for joining cultism

From the responses, the involvement of cultism is a conscious act and many engage in cultism for various reasons. Our finding indicates that one of the major programme that is behind the spread of cultism in affected communities is the level of unemployment in the state and the country at large. Most of the youths in these communities are idle with good skills and academic qualifications to give them the type of job they need. There is a high level of unemployment in Rivers State. According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), (2019, p.1), “in Q3 2018, Akwa Ibom state reported the highest unemployment rate (37.7%), followed by Rivers State with (36.4%), Bayelsa state (32.6%), Abia (31.6%) and Borno state (31.4%).” “The top 5 states with the highest unemployed population are Rivers (1,673,991), Akwa Ibom (1,357,754), Kano (1,257,130), Lagos (1,088,352) and Kaduna with (940,480)” (The Cable, 2019). The import of the NBS 2019 report indicates the threats to human security are inevitable in the Rivers State. Besides, the display of ill-gotten wealth propels these young men to take short cuts. In this generation, hard work is no longer viewed as a virtue. Nobody questions anybody on how she/he made his money. Hence, young men engage in anti-societal behaviour such as kidnapping, armed robbery, among others to make money. Chukuigwe and Albert (2015, p.56) revealed that “moral decadence/quest to get rich quickly without work... anchored more on economic survival and vague lifestyle” are some of the reasons youths joined

cultism. From our findings, most of them joined because of intimidation from their peers. Nigeria is experiencing weak institutions, especially security and judicial institutions. The security agents are bedevilled with the influence of the executive arm. The independence of the judiciary has been eroded. The security is relatively ineffective. Rivers State has experienced several jailbreaks and most inmates with cult-related cases escaped from prisons. Hence, the young men feel unprotected except they identify with one active cult group. Onyinye Edeh revealed in an interview why youths join cult such as “you won’t be intimidated. You’ll be feared... will help them attract girlfriends... having money and respect,” to earn respect and money... fight for your fellow members” (Edeh, 2018).

Reasons deduced for the increase in cult activities

From the responses, the greater percentage was affirmative that political patronage contributed to the spread of cultism in the affected communities. From our findings, criminal activities backed by patrons in government are difficult to curb. Politicians use this cult group to strengthen their political position in their various domains. Our findings collaborated with the report of Amnesty International indicted the politicians. According to the Amnesty International Report (2020), “different political parties use different criminal cult groups for their selfish interests... But they don’t think about the aftermath of everything. They don’t care what happens after elections”. The Amnesty International Report (2020) further revealed that:

The rise in cult-related violence is a result of the government’s failure to investigate arrest and prosecute perpetrators, as the culture of impunity continues to embolden further attacks... That government is still not doing enough to protect people in these communities from attacks. The killers are getting away with murder, while no one is being arrested or punished for these crimes.

The punishment for lawbreakers serves as a deterrent to those who are nursing such feelings of committing a crime. From our findings, a cultist has rarely been persecuted by the government. The government’s inability to persecute these cultists has unconsciously provided a climate of impunity which either use to justifying their existence or further fuel cult war. From our findings, in some cases, the security agents respond very late. The cult clash would have ended before their arrival even though they were informed during the commencement of the clash. From our findings, another scenario that has promoted the cult war in the affected communities is the chieftaincy tussle. For instance, Ibaa community has been plunged into conflict occasioned by chieftaincy tussle after the demise of the paramount rule Nyenwe Ali Uvuahu. The conflict began in 2008 and has polarized the community. The crisis in Ibaa has lasted for over 12 years and the community is ruined based on the intensity of cult war. “Ibaa people deserted the community. They were refugees in the neighbouring towns and villages for all these years” (TheSun, 2019). Each warring faction employs the services of these cultists to legitimize their chieftaincy stool.

Our findings also revealed that resource competition was the root cause of Rumuekpe community conflict. However, the two factions employed the services of cultists from the riverine neighbouring communities who ended killing hundreds of people and destroying properties worth millions of naira.

Effects of cult conflicts on rural development

The responses indicated overwhelming percentage was affirmative that cult conflicts impact negatively on rural development in those affected communities in Emohua, Khana and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. From our findings, the cult war has impeded some rural developments in these communities. Conflicts slow down economic activities. The affected communities are agrarian society, who lives on what they harvest from

their farms. The crisis grounded their economic activities, especially in agriculture. Poroma, Kpaa, and Abel (2018, p.76) noted that cult war “has aggravated the security challenges in Rivers State which have affected socio-economic and political activities. From our findings, the electricity project in Ibaa community was abandoned because of the cult war. Other social amenities such as primary and secondary schools, markets, health centres, among others are in deplorable conditions. Nnodim and Ochogba (2018,p.62) also agreed that “the activities of cultists have affected the socio-economic wellbeing of the people of Orashi region such that people find it very difficult to relate with friends and relatives, farm effectively, participate in fishing activities and transact business effectively.”The cult conflicts have driven development agents from these communities. The local government council has not done enough to return stability in these affected communities.

Concluding Remarks

Cultism has adversely impacted rural developments in some communities in Emohua, Khana, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government areas, Rivers State. Cult rivalries have taken scores of lives, destroyed properties, and forced inhabitants into unprepared migration, hence, created ungoverned space. From our findings, cult wars have adversely impacted on electricity projects, primary and secondary schools, markets, health centres, among others. we argued that cultism is sustained by political patrons who are desirous to control their political domains. Other events that have sustained cultism are mercenaries for traditional stool wrangling, oil theft, and armed robbery, among others. Sadly, the compromise of the security agents’ statutory obligation of maintenance of law and order are not limited to pressures from the political patrons but also for economic gains. Over time, it has been proven that security agents collaborate with the cult overlords in oil theft and artisanal refining of siphoned crude oil, making it challenging to curb cultism in Rivers State. Hence, even when the cultists are found culpable in one crime or another, the security agents will not prosecute but will release the suspect without trials. Most affected communities in Rivers State have restored to employing a private traditional security outfit for protections.

Recommendations

1. The parent should discourage their children from getting involved in cultism such as monitoring the activities of their children, knowing their peer groups, install moral discipline, and show good examples, council their children regularly, among others that are productive.
2. The government should encourage and strengthen community policing in various communities in Rivers State.
3. Community-based youth organizations in Rivers State should be proscribed immediately or set up a supervisory made up of special task force including personnel of security apparatus.
4. The government should formulate and implement policies aimed at reducing unemployment, corruption, poverty and illiteracy levels in Rivers State
5. The Electoral Management Body should sanction politicians engaged in violent activities against their opponents.
6. The Rivers State should review the primary and secondary school curriculum by introducing subjects that will educate youths on the consequences of joining secret cults
7. The non-governmental organizations should collaborate with the Community Development Committee (CDC) in community-based advocacy in discouragement of cultism in various communities.
8. Matters relating to who is the rightful occupant of traditional stools should handle quickly by the government to avoid unnecessary chieftaincy wriggling and engagement of cultists.

9. Religious Organizations should be involved through awareness crusade and educating parents and wards on the implication of joining cultism. Moral messages should be preached on the pulpit such as honesty, the dignity of labour, and good conduct.
10. Clerics should desist from honouring fraudsters and their attitude of the cleric should reflect his message and stop the celebration of ill-gotten wealth in the society. For instance, the Omega Power Ministries (OPM) in Rivers State had made efforts, particularly at the Ogoni axis in converting warring cult members. Such gestures should be encouraged by the state government, and other religious bodies should join in ensuring the eradication of cultism in Rivers State.
11. The government should strengthen laws relating to oil theft, artisanal refining, among others to reduce cult rivalries over supremacy in oil-bearing communities.

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