SAFER CAMPUSES AND THE MENACE OF CULTISM IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS: A READING OF CHARITY ANGYA’S GONE SAILING

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Abstract

Clashes of cult groups in Nigerian Universities in recent times have posed a serious threat to peace on our campuses. The nefarious activities of cult groups have been a challenge that has necessitated stakeholders in the education sector to call for serious measures to combat the menace. Drama as an art of social relationships can serve as a medium to inform, educate and communicate vital truths to its audience. Herein drama becomes a tool to mobilize action for self assertion. Charity Angya’s Gone Sailing is not left out here as a playwright who in a bid to fight this menace, has brought the search light on the phenomenon. The paper submits that, the university system aims at producing people who are knowledgeable in their disciplines and of ‘Good character’ to be able to fit into the society and contribute positively to that society. However, the varying degrees of horror that cult groups unleash, leads one to conclude that they can be equated to bandits and possibly tagged, campus terrorists. The paper concludes that, the art of cultism threatens the very existence of our ivory towers as its perpetrators strongly resist abiding by social laws and order. It recommends that, to deter recruitment of young people into cult groups, the law must have full sway without delay on culprits and perpetrators of this menace and their sponsors.

Key Words: Cultism, Nigerian Universities, Academic Excellence

Introduction

Universities are meant to be centre’s of academic excellence where people are trained and empowered with skills and knowledge to advance society. This explains the meaning of education which is the process through which a person’s mind is developed as a result of learning in an institution or college.

Molding character of individuals who come to learn in our institutions is the first objective of university education that goes along with learning - knowledge gained through reading and study. However, the goals of university education have been tarnished and thrown to the mud in recent times by students who are lazy or spoilt, who don’t even want to learn.

Dzurghba writing on this avers that:
Character is inherently made up of moral principles
(moral standards) which include the following: truth,
honesty, love, kindness, patience, peace, and justice.
Character is made up of also sensitivities or emotions
which include the following: anger, aggression, cruelty,
violece, anxiety, worry, sorrow, grief, regret, remorse,
cowardice, fear and wickedness. (3)

The university system therefore aims at producing people who are
knowledgeable in their disciplines and of ‘Good character’ to be able to fit into
the society and contribute positively to that society. Suffice to mention that,
institutions of learning are supposed to be centre’s of excellence in knowledge and
growth. A place where young leaders of tomorrow, are groomed into specialized
disciplines and adulthood as well cultured members of the society. Unfortunately,
our universities and institutions of higher learning have become doldrums where
academic culture is replaced with the quest for supremacy by inglorious
fraternities, gangsterism and banditry.
The varying degrees of horror that cult groups unleash, leads one to conclude that
they can be equated to bandits and possibly tagged campus terrorists who dictate
grades that they want in examinations, molest and rape wantonly, all in a bid to
establish supremacy over rival groups.

Suffice it to mention, violence, bloodshed as well as death have taken over
our campuses as a result of cult rivalry and struggles for supremacy. Recently, a
student of the Ekiti State University was hacked to death by a rival gang. Chijioke
Jannah of the Daily post in his report submits that; “The man was said to have
been hacked to death with a machete at Osekita area of Iworoko-Ekiti. One of the
students living in the community, who asked not to be named because of the
sensitive nature of the incident, said the victim was allegedly shot several times
before he was hacked to death.” (Daily Post 1).

In another report in the Vanguard clash of cult groups left 15 dead and 36
captured. According to the report, “The blood bath of the four days started in one
of those spots along Egerton Street when two opposing group members were
engaged in a fight over a ‘levy’ of N50 which a member of one group refused to
pay to the other group and, in the ensuring fracas, some people were critically
injured. The next day, one of the major characters in the fight, whose name was
given as Emmanuel Abuchi, was chased by the other group through several streets
until they caught up with him at Palm Street/Mayne Avenue where he was hacked
to death. That killing opened the floodgates of attacks as over the next three days,
members of the various groups began hunting members of each other and killings
were reported in parts of the city. Edibedibe/Fenton Street, Edibedibe/ Richard
Henshaw Street, Mayne Avenue/ Nyong Edem Street, Target/ Academy Street,
Mbukpa Junction and Nyahasang village were littered with corpses of combatants
in the battle” (Vanguard 1).

Early June 2017, residents of Akure woke up to reprisal attacks over the
death of a cult member. According to Dayo Johnson in the Vanguard, “NO fewer
than 10 persons have been killed within the last three days in Akure, the Ondo State capital, with others injured, as rival cult groups do battle over supremacy. The four teenagers used an abandoned two-storey building near the state House of Assembly as their hideout. Reports had it that the cult groups engaged in bloody gun battles at Oke-Aro, Old Garage, NEPA Junction and Odi-Olowo areas.

Dayo further reports that, “the killing of a member of the group sparked off a reprisal attack, which increased the casualty figures. Vanguard learned that four members of one of the cult groups, riding on Okada, stormed NEPA Junction at about 9p.m. Monday, and shot their target at close range. The killing created tension in the state capital, as streets were deserted following fear of another reprisal attack by the other group. Speaking on the killings, the state’s police image maker, Femi Joseph, said only three persons were killed, while one survived gunshots during the cult war. Joseph said the fight was as a result of a reprisal attack by one of the groups, whose member was earlier killed by a rival group. According to him, over 20 suspects have been rounded up across the Akure metropolis and they include suspected cult members, robbers, and murderers amongst others”. (Vanguard 1)

The harvest of deaths recorded as a result of cult clashes on and off campuses is disturbing because, it has earned these groups a reputation among the public as associations of social disharmony that threaten the peace that should be found in tertiary institutions. George Ehusani strongly reiterates this and submits that; “We are recording each day in Nigeria a number of casualties of the soaring violence, including acid attacks, armed robbery, hired assassination, cult violence in our tertiary institutions, and ethnic violence that now threatens the very foundation of our nation-state. After seven students were murdered in cold blood at the Obafemi Awolowo University, in July this year, Nigerians who seemed to have suddenly woken up from their long stupor were shocked and outraged and with a united voice called for an end to violent cultism in our institutions of higher learning” (2017,1)

This turn of events as orchestrated by blood thirsty cult groups portends serious danger to the future of peace in our institutions of learning and indeed villages as these cult clashes often spill into streets and environs beyond our universities.

Ogunloye, one of the original seven who first started pyrates fraternity dissociates the founding vision from the state of violence in our universities when he submits that;

During our time, we generated public debates and published campus newspaper the scorpion … nothing we did was in the dark, we held seminars at the arts theatre, the university knew who the pyrates were at the time. We had a directory showing members names, field of study and address… what is happening today is completely a different kettle of fish… we are not secret and we abhor violence (African Gaurdian, 5)
The Pyrates as the first confraternity established by Wole Soyinka present themselves as distinguished students who had positive values and respect for human dignity at the core of their doctrinal foundation as a group. In the words of Awosanmi, “The birth of the Pyrates confraternity in 1952/3, could be regarded as the contribution of the seven Nigerian university undergraduates to the nationalist awakening and struggles for justice and giving voice to the voiceless … the pyrates were paradigms of discipline, intellectual vibrancy, normal uprightness, academic brilliance and responsibility”. (86, 93) It is rather disappointing that, the original ideals of this group have been bastardized and the splinter groups that emerged, have become lawless and given credence to the toga of cultism which these groups such as Black Axe fraternity, Bucaneers, Vikings, Eiyi, Black Berets, Black Bra’s, Sea Dogs, White Angels, Dirty Virgins, the Red Devils, Daughters of Eve, Red Berrets, Black Queens, the Amazons, Green Berrets, the Maphites, K.K.K, Supreme Daughters of Medusa, the Sharons, the River Angels, the Daughters of Jezebel, the Black Cat, Trojan Horse, the Scorpions have come to be branded.

Synopsis of the Play

Angya’s *Gone Sailing* is a short radio play which was first published in 2000 in a collection of plays titled *Circle of the moon and other Plays*. The action of the play centres on Aondona who goes missing on the Initiation Night on campus. Angya creates two fictitious cult groups in the world of the play, the Black Night Cult and the Scopions. She establishes a rivalry and struggle for supremacy on campus between the groups. His girlfriend Jane is approached by Biodun a notorious cult boy on campus who leaves a threatening note for her to think fast. This influences Aondonas decision to join a rival group to withstand the intimidation. As the progresses, his friend Geofrey expresses worry and in a bid to find out his whereabouts discovers that, it is initiation night and Aondona has gone to be initiated by a cult group. Events turn bad when it is discovered that a rival gang ambushed the scene of the initiation and a student was killed. It is later revealed that, the student killed is Aondona.

The Play *Gone Sailing*: A Critical Appraisal

Campus cultism is a social problem that requires collective action of everyone in the society to curb its menace. Charity Angya’s *Gone Sailing* incisively charts the course in the fight against cultism and its attendant problems. The play speaks to students, parents and society at large cataloguing the ills, pains and impact of cult groups and fraternities on our campuses. The play details the life of a young undergraduate Aondona who goes missing on the night known as ‘initiation night’ on Campus. Godfrey his friend expresses his fears thus:
Godfrey: … the library is closed. Any way it’s after 10.p.m.… I wouldn’t be worried but **tonight’s not a particularly good night to be out on the campus.**

James: You mean you don’t know? **Tonight is the night for initiation into the cult. They are sailing tonight.** (Gone Sailing 35) (Emphasis mine)

The fears and anxiety expressed here are germane because secret cults hold their meetings and carry out their operations in the night. As such they are seen as nocturnal societies. The roommate and friends cannot understand why he is nowhere to be found, on this particular night and doesn’t turn up for a date with his girl friend on campus. James and Toun describe the changes that came over their friend making us understand that he likely might have joined a cult group. In their words:

James: … a slight noise woke me up and I turned to see him closing the door. He didn’t seem ready to talk and I was so tired so I went back to sleep immediately.

Toun: Was that usual?

James: … recently I noticed he seemed disinclined to talk about anything. He always seemed so preoccupied… his group of friends changed. I noticed that a number of these tough looking guys on campus seemed to want to talk with him. At first I thought he was trying to avoid them but recently, it seems it’s me he tries to avoid… (Gone Sailing 36 – 37)

The above description presents a picture of a disturbed and distracted student who originally was focused. Also the change in focus pushes him to change his circle of friends and prefers the company of his new mischievous friends. Angya through the conversation of Toun and James consciously exposes the change in behavior of most cultists especially in relating to other students and classmates.

Aondona’s girlfriend in the world of the play tells us how the notorious cultist Biodun approached her but she politely turned him down. In her words;

Jane: Last semester just before the exams, one of the cult boys approached me and told me he was interested in me. I was afraid because this guy is so notorious and one of the easily identifiable guys on campus… I told the boy that I’d think about it. He then left me a threatening note that
I should think fast. I was so confused and scared. I knew that I had to tell Aondona…
(Gone Sailing 38 - 39)

The above lines establish how cult boys intimidate young girls on campus and coerce them into relationships without giving them any option. This often leads to girls being raped who refuse such advances.

The world of the play also shows how cultism creates an atmosphere of fear and tension among students as the play depicts Biodun as a cultist in a rival gang who threatens James when the latter makes inquiries regarding the whereabouts of his roommate.

James: Biodun, where is my roommate?
Biodun: I am not his keeper and if you don’t move out Of my way immediately I am going to shoot you
(Gone Sailing 41)

This atmosphere created here shows how students on our campuses are pushed around in a bid to establish supremacy, power and authority by cult groups. This often distorts smooth learning and teaching in our schools.

The core issue here is that, these character traits are inimical to the goal of learning as the student in question who joins these groups, finds learning and pursuit of knowledge to be meaningless. Suffice to mention that, the university takes prospective students through a voyage of intellectual engagement that aims to impact and prepare students to become transformers of the society and humanity at large. However when a student abandons the goal of seeking knowledge and seeks to rather become a social nuisance then the ultimate goal of university education is defeated.

As the play progresses, Godfrey brings news of a student that has been shot and a follow up to this, reveals the name of the student as Aondona who they have been looking for.

Godfrey: … there has been a clash between the Black Nite cult and the Scorpions, they’ve shot one student and there is confusion everywhere…
James: Jane, I think you had better come down. We’ve recovered the body of the student that was shot. And the other students too have been arrested… it’s Aondona that was shot… (Gone Sailing 43 - 44).

Across the nations institutions of higher learning, the trail of blood and deaths that these groups leave behind could be likened to a harvest of horror where innocent students are also caught in the wave of violence as stray bullets and mistaken identities result in deaths of innocent bystanders. Angya in the
above discourse, reveals the consequence of belonging to these associations on campus - the likelihood of being killed by rival gangs as cult member is clearly spelt out in the world of the play.

The playwright does not spare words in showing how this trend affects erstwhile students who should focus on academic excellence and aim at becoming graduates who will generate ideas that will transform our society, than focusing on negative and evil schemes that eventually destroy their dreams. It also presents the rape of youth and academic excellence that denies young people the opportunity of becoming problem solvers and solution providers to social problems as they apply their university education or knowledge to develop their nation and the world at large.

It is imperative to mention that, many students that join these groups forget that after the initiations they will face possible ‘hits’ by rival groups. Thus, when these killings and counter killings begin, it comes as a horror to some initiates while to some, the horror begins when they find that their initiation involves bizarre acts and is held at some of the most unholy places like cemeteries and deep forests with human skulls and coffins displayed.

Mr. Amusa K. O aptly describes this phenomenon thus,

A prospective member usually undergoes a gory procedure of initiation into the fold of cults like being asked to jump over fiery fires, climb very tall trees and jump down, given 50 strokes of the cane, asked to lie on coffins and are trodden on by masked old members. At times, their bodies are lacerated and some concoction injected into them and other rituals. (43)

This process is meant to toughen new initiates and give them courage to face certain situations in the event of violent attacks from rivals or when the need arises to mete out violence. However, the social implication of this phenomenon is only measurable from the impact of the pain and torture that fellow students, families, community and negative images the activities give our universities. Families and friends suffer emotional injury and psychological trauma from deaths of loved ones as a result of violent cult clashes on our campuses.

When negative and destructive interests become the focus of students whose parents have invested heavily to train, the country and communities at large, lose man power development as the monies used to train these students go down the drain. In the light of the above, government and parents have stepped up the collective fight against cultism within our universities and its environs. Several non-governmental organizations and associations created by parents to confront this menace have taken campaigns to universities on the dangers of cult groups. These groups include, the natural Anti-cult movement, the evolution of federation of parent against campus cult (FEPAC) and the United Network of Institutions and Schools against Campus Cults (UNISACC) whose campaigns are
already recording huge success in promoting anti-cultism in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Violent cult clashes remain a serious challenge to academic excellence and wellbeing of students and lecturers within the university system. Cultism threatens the very existence of our ivory towers as its perpetrators strongly resist abiding by social laws and order. It is an illicit and devilish development that has sunk its fangs in our youths around our campuses. The violence these groups mete out is traumatic as survivors, victims, or perpetrators never remain the same.

The paper recommends that, vigorous and strategic campaigns against the evils of cultism be strengthened and intensified around our campuses and these campaigns should extend beyond the campus to parents and guardians to sensitize them to be more vigilant about the behavior of friends and wards.

University authorities are urged to respond swiftly to cases of intimidation, clashes and threats among students and or lecturers by these groups to avoid loss of lives and property. This should be done with regard to anonymity and identity protection of the party concerned so as to forestall reprisal attacks after such issues are handled. This means a robust student unionism and surveillance against bad eggs and strict disciplinary measures must be put in place to check this menace.

It is worth mentioning that, since cultists are often armed, staff in charge of security are at a loss, on how to apprehend such students when situations arise. It is needful to train and obtain licenses to arm our staff in charge of security on our campuses towards making them combatant ready in the fight against these terror gangs.

To deter recruitment of young people into cult groups, the law must have full sway without delay on culprits and perpetrators of this menace and their sponsors.

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