



## Assessing the Effect of Cultism and Cult Related Activities on Education in the Rivers' Orashi Region of Rivers State from 1999 to 2019.

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### ABSTRACT

The study x-rayed cultism and cult related activities in the Rivers' Orashi region of Rivers State, and its impact on Education in the area. The Orashi region comprises the villages, towns and communities lying along the Orashi river flood plains; which has its source as an estuary of the Nun river which is also a tributary of the River Niger. The study was carried out among the communities of the different ethnic nationalities of the Rivers' Orashi region within the period of 1999-2019. The ethnic nationalities include the Abuans, Oduals, Ekpeyes, Engenis, Ndonis, Egbemas, Ogbas, Egis, and the Kalabaris. Cultism, cult-related activities and education were conceptualised in the study. The history of cultism through the period under consideration, as it affects the region was examined laying credence to why such a nefarious game could thrive and survive in such a renowned region; thereafter the effect on education was critically reviewed. It was quite comedic that despite the pains, a conclusion with a sigh of relief is the end. Suggestions were offered among which were that Repentant cultist should be engaged either in skills training or for those who have certificates or qualifications or already have a skill, be gainfully employed. This will challenge others to repent, while Public enlightenment campaigns should be organized especially, for the rural communities.

**Key Words:** Cultism, Cult-related activities, Cult-groups, Education, Ethnic-Nationalities Militancy,

### Introduction

On daily basis, in the pages of newspapers, social media, radio and television, the story is insecurity. There is hardly any part of Nigeria that is not experiencing one form of insecurity or the other. Nnodim and Ochogba, (2018) decried the seemingly intractable challenge of insecurity in Nigeria. According to the scholars, herdsmen and Boko Haram attacks are ravaging the northern and some of the eastern parts of the country, while the menaces of cultism, cult-related killings and kidnapping have hydra-headed security threat in the south-south region of the country. Although cultism, cult-related killings and kidnapping have widely been experienced in some other parts of the country, they seem to be more prevalent in the Niger Delta region, particularly in Rivers State (Eyo, 2015; Akasike, 2018; Rilwan, 2018).

The term "cult" is traditionally used to reference social groups defined by their extreme [religious](#), philosophical or [spiritual](#) beliefs focused on a particular personality, object or [goal](#). These groups often use devious psychological techniques to gain and control adherents (i.e. high pressure recruiting tactics) and are often characterized by [socially deviant](#) practices or [novel](#) beliefs. There is no particular membership size for a cult. The groups can range in size from a few local members to international organizations with millions. A cult may be defined as an organization where a group of people come together to pledge their allegiance under oath and have a social bond of commitment and dedication for the goal of the organization (Blinklist, 2018). It is a small group of people who have extreme beliefs and ideas which only members have access to. Cultism refers to a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission, policy and initiation formalities as well as their mode of operations are done in secret and kept secret. Cultism is the devotion and dedication to activities and practices of a cult. It is an enclosed association devoted to the same course which often clashes with accepted norms and values of everyday life (Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi, 2015). Cult groups engage in nefarious activities such as extortion, armed robbery, maiming, rape, murder and use of drugs (Nnodim and Ochogba, 2018). Cultism is rampant in school environments these days as a result of crave for power and popularity by students, pressure from peer groups and the need to feel secure. The major characteristic of a cult is that their activities are carried out at odd hours of the day and are at variance with the acceptable norms of society. Their activities are kept secret and are kept away from other members of society or non-members of the group. They carry out their meetings when people are not aware of, especially during the odd hours and far away from residences. A member of secrete cult is called a cultist.

Cultism is rampant in schools all over the world. It was known to be at its peak in tertiary institutions but it is no more news that it has expanded into secondary and even primary schools. This social vice has eaten up the educational and moral standard of students, innocent ones are being lured into the vice and other social vices like drug abuse, armed robbery murder etc.

Education is a gradual process which brings positive changes in human life and behaviour. It is a process of acquiring knowledge through study or imparting the knowledge by way of instructions or some other practical procedure. Education brings a natural and lasting change in an individual's

reasoning and ability to achieve the targeted goal. It facilitates the investigations of our own considerations and thoughts and makes it ready for expression in various shapes. Education is the passage to progress (Ezemenari, 2016). Education enables us to distinguish between right and wrong and in the absence of education, we cannot do what we need to do or we cannot achieve life goal. It is additionally the way to our fate as achievements can only be accomplished when individuals have information, aptitudes, and frame of mind. In this way, education becomes the medium through which we can associate with various individuals and offer our thoughts. To tackle issues and do inventiveness we first need to gain proficiency with some essential abilities. We require learning and abilities to wind up increasingly imaginative, ideas and these can only be achieved fundamentally, through education. Education is to pick up the capacity to develop and take care of issues in order to achieve their lawful motives.

Education goes beyond what takes place within the four walls of the classroom. A child gets education from his experiences outside the school as well as from those within. There are three main types of education, namely, Formal, Informal and Non-formal Izukanachi (2016). All the forms of education, under normal circumstances, take place in the Orashi region.

Formal Education usually takes place in the premises of the school, where a person may learn basic, academic, or trade skills under a carefully planned curriculum of instructions. Small children often attend a nursery or kindergarten but often formal education begins in elementary school and continues with secondary school. Post-secondary education (or higher education) is usually at a college or university which may grant an academic degree. Formal education is given by specially qualified teachers that are efficient in the art of instruction and discipline.

Education may be informal where a parent teaches a child how to prepare a meal or ride a bicycle. Unlike formal education, informal education is not imparted by an institution such as school or college. Informal education is not given according to any fixed timetable. There is no set curriculum required. Informal education consists of experiences and actually living in the family or community. In this type of education, conscious efforts are not involved. It is neither pre-planned nor deliberate. It may be learned at some marketplace, hotel or at home.

Non-formal education includes adult basic education, adult literacy education or school equivalency preparation. In non-formal education, someone (who is not in school) can learn literacy, other basic skills or job skills. Home education, individualized instruction (such as programmed learning), distance learning and computer-assisted instruction are other possibilities. Non-formal education is imparted consciously and deliberately and systematically implemented. It is usually organized for a homogeneous group. Non-formal education is programmed to serve the needs of the identified group. This necessitates flexibility in the design of the curriculum and the scheme of evaluation (Asako and Okwo, 2018).

The Orashi region is the part of Rivers State lying along and within the Orashi River flood plains. Collectively, it's people are known as Orashi; and it consist of four local government areas among which are Abua/Odual, Ahoada-East, Ahoada-West and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni. For decades the ethnic nationalities that peopled Orashi region, peacefully co-existed. These, ethnic nationalities include the Abuan, Odual, Engeni, Ekpeye, Ogba, Egbema and Ndoni (Jack 2018). The abundant land mass, the aquatic resources, the Orashi river and the Sombrero rivers, made life sweet for the people. The resources also brought multinational oil companies such as Shell Petroleum Development Company, Niger Delta Petroleum Resources, Total E & P Nigeria Limited, Nigeria Agip Oil Company Limited and several other subsidiaries.

Its people are hard-working and industrious in their farming and fishing business. Above all, their hospitality was legendary. But no thanks to bad leadership, Orashi people are only remembered for violence (Jack 2018). In recent years starting from the build up to 2015 general election the area witnessed massive violence. And individual ambitions changed the peaceful ambience of the region to one of daily and gruesome bloodletting.

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### **Cult Related Activities**

The cultists are so numerous and it is difficult to identify who a cultist is. At present they are about 65% of the youths in Rivers State (Ogele, 2020); they interact and interrelate on daily basis in their special languages that are difficult to decode by nonmembers. The cultist employed some of the tactics and modus operandi of the security agencies when carrying out their nefarious and dastardly acts. There is no community in Rivers State that is free from cultists, or that had not been terrorized by cult related activities. There is no public university in Nigeria that is totally free from cultism. Different cult groups are always attacking each other every semester; their constant clashes usually paved way for wanton destruction of property and untimely death of members. It is important to point out that conflicts emanating from cult clashes on the various communities have really posed serious threat to the inhabitants.

Osakinle and Falana (2011) describe secret cult as a group of people whose activities are carried out in exclusive locations and unusual times. The authors noted further that the activities of these cult members cause a lot of bane: destruction of private and public property, disruption of academic activities in schools, massive killing of innocent individuals, and a host of other similar problems. According to Onoyume and Iheamnachor (2016), such activities include extortion of money by threats, class disruption, fighting, improper dressing, untidiness, wearing of jewelry to school, smoking, whistling or shouting in corridors, alcohol abuse, vandalism, carving names on desks, writing names on walls, robbery, vandalization and destruction of lives and property. They fight with sharp cutlasses and irons, and inflict injuries on themselves. Occasionally, they kidnap and rape girls. Their activities are often nefarious, hidden and nocturnal. They intimidate authorities especially teachers, to award marks to pass examinations. In addition, cult members exploit individuals and pose a threat to the society. Prevalent in the activities of cultists among the youths in the communities are smoking and drug abuse. They spend much time playing music, organizing and attending parties, engaging in various clandestine and occultic practices, and other forms of vices. Cultism appears to rank very high among the maladaptive behaviours among secondary school students (Morrow, Rodriguez and King, 2015).

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## Characteristics of Cults

Among the multidimensional modus operandi of cultists, the following stand out and cut across all cult and cult related organizations irrespective of size and type:

Isolating members and penalizing them for leaving, seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders and dishonoring the family unit. Absolute authoritarianism without meaningful accountability. No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry. No meaningful financial disclosure regarding budget, expenses such as an independently audited financial statement.

Unreasonable fear about the outside world, such as impending catastrophe, evil conspiracies, and persecutions. There is no legitimate reason to leave, former followers are always wrong in leaving, negative or even evil. Followers feel they can never be "good enough".

The group/leader is always right. The group/leader is the exclusive means of knowing "truth" or receiving validation, no other process of discovery is really acceptable or credible.

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## Causes of Cultism

The emergence of cults in society, as alarming as it is, burgeoned as a result of several factors affecting the fabrics of the society. Authors' views are divergent on these factors. Paulley (2014), Onyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015), Mediayanose (2016), Nnajieta (2015) and a host of others adduced causes of cultism in the society. These causes include but are not limited to the following:

1. **Need for Protection:** Some meek students are lured or bullied into cults as a result of their anxiety not to be attacked or harassed by members of secret cults or other aggressive individuals.
2. **Economic/Financial Benefits:** Some individuals see cultism as a veritable avenue for making money through unwholesome activities such as prostitution, blackmail, examination racketeering and other unscrupulous activities.
3. **Exerting Authority or Supremacy:** Individuals patronize cults in order to be able to flaunt their power or influence to other members of their school community.
4. **Broken Family:** Some cultists embrace cultism as an outlet from their traumatic home experiences, especially where there is lack of harmony.
5. **Drug Abuse:** Some students dabble into cultism as a result of overpowering influence of drugs which they get easily from cults and they could not bail out later, having been sworn to oaths of allegiance to the cult.
6. **Lack of Guidance or Direction:** Some members of secret cults are usually muscled or lured into joining cults due to inadequate guidance by adults.
7. **Indoctrination and Deceit:** Usually new cult recruits are indoctrinated about bloated ideals of the group and benefits accruable from it.
8. **Influence of Politicians and School Administration:** Assurance of connection to powerful people in schools and politicians from larger society is a motivating factor for some eventual members of cults.
9. **Academic Excellence:** Promise of success in school work through cheating and other unconventional means provide attractive prospect for some cult members.
10. **Peer Influence:** Some students join cult groups because their friends also belong to such cults. This is accentuated by adolescence.
11. **Need to Exert Vengeance:** Some students join cults to seek revenge for wrongs committed against them.
12. **Deplorable School Facilities:** Many schools lack adequate school facilities, for studying and recreation. Cult members are distracted in finding a past time.
13. **Clampdown on Unionism:** Sometimes when school administrations and government disallow or limit student unionism, students fight back through cults.
14. **Parental Influence:** Some cult members are encouraged or initiated by their parents, who were themselves cult members.
15. **Out of coercion:** Others joined cult because they were forced by the cultists. These people have no option but joined them out of threat.

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## Command Structure of the Cultists

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.

**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. An attempt to question for whatever reason including justice is viewed as rebellion and treated as such.

**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 is 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 fail 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.

**Axe man:** The axe man is the head of armories. 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 of 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.

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## 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 claimed to be 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 were carried out in the bush, at sea banks, and anywhere that is conducive for the process.

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## Source of Funding

A public view concerning the funding of cult groups in Rivers State is that it comes from different sources. Many individuals chatted with indicated the means of funding cultist to include extortion of money from the vulnerable, particularly the traders; political patronage, donation, armed robbery, oil theft, artisanal refinery, sale of drugs, royalties, mercenaries, prostitutes are made to buy "landing rights", looting of homes and landlords utilize the services of cultist to forcefully evict tenants.

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## History of Cultism in Rivers State as it affects the Rivers' Orashi region

Rivers State has a topography of the fairly flat plain caught in a web of several rivers, creeks, and tributaries, creating what Okonny (2002) refers to 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 history of cult groups in Rivers state according to Ogele (2020) view, can be traced to the formation of the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) also known as the Adventurers or the De Norsemen Club of Nigeria at the University of Port Harcourt in 1984, by a former member of the Buccaneers Confraternity. In 1991, Onengiye Ofori Terika, a member of the Klansmen confraternity, popularly known as Occasion Boy, formed the Deebam cult group in his community Bukuma (Kalabari kingdom), in Degema Local Government Area of Rivers state. The group was meant to serve as the street wing of the Klansmen confraternity formed in the University of Calabar in 1983, and also to fight for compensation owed by Shell and other oil companies to the Bukuma community (Owonikoko & Ifukor, 2016).

In the early 1990s, to reduce the influence of the KK in Rivers state, and to maintain territorial control, the SVC elected to form its own street wing which it termed the Junior Vikings Confraternity (JVC) as a counter to the Occasion Boy led Deebam group. The JVC venture was unsuccessful but it eventually laid the foundation for the formation of the Deewell group in the Diobu axis of Port Harcourt. In the early 2000s, with the Deewell group losing territory and members and still unable to match the ruthlessness and seeming effectiveness of the Deebam group despite allegedly having support from the state

government, a group of five SVC members, which was termed the '5 Wise Men' came together. This group of five included Ateke Tom and Julius Oruitemeka, who were then trained on the practices of the new group which was named Icelanders, and which was handed over to Ateke Tom—leader of the street cult group known as The Ugliers to manage (Nwaogu, Weli & Mbee, 2019). The Icelanders cult group setup its base in Okochiri in Okrika Local Government of Rivers state, the home of Ateke Tom. Over time, and in a bid to rebrand and fend off the negative perception its violent activities had brought, the group was rechristened the Niger Delta Vigilante Service (NDVS). Many other cult groups have been formed at different points in time in the history of Rivers state.

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### Effect of cultism on Education in the Rivers' Orashi region

Though cultism and activities of cults are more prevalent in the tertiary institutions such as Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities, only one of which is located in the Orashi region (FCE, (Tech), Omoku), the pervasive influence of cults gradually infiltrated other tiers of the education system, especially the secondary school level, where the attendant violence, torture, harassment and intimidation associated with cultism found its way in the region (Amadi, Imoh-Itah & Obomanu (2016). The influence of cults and cultism has also permeated the entire communities, meaning that it has found its way into social groups and organizations, establishments and even religious organizations Jannah (2017). Little wonder why cults have been reported to manifest in the primary schools in the area (Ajayi, Eundayo & Osalusi, 2012). In the views of Osijonwu (2017), secondary schools in Nigeria have their fair share of cultism. This statement is highly applicable to the Rivers' Orashi region.

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### General Effects of Cultism

Scholars such as Nnam (2014), Mediamanose (2016), Omebe and Omebe (2015), Birabil and Okanezi (2017), Udoh and Ikezu (2015), Onyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015) and Iheamnachor (2016) have explicitly stated some direct and adverse effects of cultism, generally to the education system which includes among others:

**Destruction of Lives of Stakeholders in the Education Sector:** The cultists unleashed mayhem on teachers, students and members of school managements, to the extent that some were killed or permanently maimed through violent acts such as shooting, stabbing, acid baths and other dangerous attacks. Such attacks destabilize the educational system by creating palpable fear in the hearts of its stakeholders. This resulted to teachers refusing to accept transfer or posting to schools in the area. For safety, existing staff in the secondary and technical schools abandoned their job and ran away from the schools (Yafigborhi & Iheamnachor, 2018)

**Heinous crimes like armed robbery, rape, kidnapping, black mailing, Prostitution:** Cult members engage in robbery and other dangerous crime to terrorize their victims and usually to make money needed to sustain their expensive lifestyles, procure arms, buy protection from corrupt law enforcement agents, pay hospital bills when attacked and pay for legal fees when their members are arrested for crimes. Parents were forced but to take their wards away for refuge in Port Harcourt and other safer places. This left the schools deserted and up till today some schools are yet to recover.

**Examination Malpractice:** Cultism encouraged examination malpractice as cult members, forced examiners to compromise evaluation procedures through the use of inducement, sheer aggression or blackmail. This ultimately attenuates standards and quality assurance in the education of the area.

**Poor Academic Performance:** The operation of cults inhibits learning by creating fear and tension in the school environment. Learning is known to thrive best in an atmosphere devoid of elements of threat, therefore, it takes its toll on academic performance of students. Cultists also fail to study hard while attacking rivals or their victims or worse still while attempting to evade attack.

**Destruction of Property:** Cults turned to destroy schools and school property, to draw attention to their grievances. Houses, vehicles, stationery, and other facilities belonging to educational institutions were damaged by cults.

**Disruption of School Calendar:** School managements had no option but to shut down their institutions, sometimes for a long time, as a result of mindless destruction of lives and property due to cultism. This elongates or disrupted the school calendar. Nche, Wachukwu and Nwaoga (2019).

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### Conclusion

The effect of this hydra dreaded monster called cultism, besides the narrative is better not imagined. During the interaction with some elderly men and women, one of them preferred the Nigeria civil war to the activities of cultists in the area. This analogy really portray the evils meted on people within the period of besiege. Regrettably, certain prominent personalities and political office aspirants and holders and the security agencies particularly the police, who should ordinarily fight against the menace, are known to be sponsors and godfathers of these seemingly innocent youths. While the occasion harm has been done, it is praise singing that the situation has greatly improved today.

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### Suggestions

Based on the investigations and the facts gathered through direct and indirect interactions, interviews and consultations, references as well as social media interactions, it is hereby recommended as follows:

- (i) The anti-cultism act that is already passed into law by government should be practically and strictly implemented. This will exonerate government and demonstrate seriousness to deal with the menace.
- (ii) Repentant cultist should be engaged either in skills training or for those who have certificates or qualifications or already have a skill, be gainfully engaged. This will challenge others to repent
- (iii) Public enlightenment campaigns especially against the evils of cultism should be organized especially, for the rural communities.
- (iv) There should be a mechanism to ensure checks and balances between and among the security agencies, traditional institutions and political class.

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