

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF CULTISM IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND OFFERING A LONG- TERM FIX

Egbeyemi Ganiyat Adeola, Olorode Jide John (PhD) and Hadaina Bilikis Olabisi

Business Education Department, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Cultism in higher educational institutions refers to the phenomenon of students becoming involved in secret societies or groups that often engage in illicit activities, including violence, intimidation, and criminal behavior. This issue has plagued educational institutions across the globe, particularly in developing countries. Despite various interventions, cultism remains a persistent challenge, disrupting academic environments and endangering the safety of students and staff. This paper explores the causes, impacts, and existing solutions to the problem of cultism and proposes a long-term strategy to eliminate its presence in higher education. It calls for policy reform, preventive measures, comprehensive mental health support, community engagement, and government action to foster a culture of non-violence and academic excellence. Additionally, this paper seeks to understand the root causes of cultism, examine its impacts on educational institutions, assess current intervention strategies, and offer a long-term solution to combat this pervasive issue. By identifying the underlying factors contributing to cultism and proposing a comprehensive solution, this study aims to contribute to the creation of safer, more inclusive, and academically thriving university environments.

Keywords: Cultism; Higher educational Institutions; campus Security; Academic environment; Policy reform; Nigeria

Introduction

A cult is a group or movement that exhibits extreme devotion to a charismatic leader, ideology, or practice. Cults often isolate members from mainstream society, exerting significant control over their behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Characteristics include: authoritarian leadership, exclusive membership, and a tendency to recruit and retain members through coercive or manipulative means. Cults can be destructive, causing harm to members and society.

A cult could be said to emanate from great and excessive admiration or belief in a person or idea. This could be manifested in rituals, praise songs, chants and worship. Secret cults could therefore be defined as a set of practices, belief system or idea whose essence is known only to the inner members and excessively admired and defended even to the point of laying down one's life. It is this doggedness and strong conviction demonstrated by members that reinforce the importance of and awe for the group especially among non-members. (Adigun, 2005)

Cultism in higher educational institutions is a deeply rooted and often violent phenomenon that continues to affect academic communities worldwide, particularly in developing nations. It involves student membership in secret societies that engage in illicit and criminal activities, including violence, intimidation, and extortion. These groups often operate under a veil of secrecy, utilizing rituals of loyalty, intimidation, and violence to exert control. The impact of cultism is felt not only in the disruption of the academic environment but also in the wider social fabric of the university.

The emergence of cultism in universities can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s when some groups were formed as a reaction to oppressive political climates or in resistance to colonial systems. However, over time, many of these groups transformed into violent organizations more focused on gaining power and material wealth than on their initial ideological goals. In countries like Nigeria and South Africa, cultism is a significant concern for both university administrations and governments. Despite numerous interventions, including stricter laws and university policies, cultism continues to thrive, often under the radar of administrators and law enforcement.

This paper explores the multifaceted nature of cultism in higher education, analyzes its causes and consequences, and presents a comprehensive long-term strategy for addressing this persistent issue.

Origin of Cultism

The roots of cultism in universities lie in political and social movements. Cults in higher education first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s when students formed resistance groups to oppose colonial rule and political oppression. Initially, these groups, such as the Neo-Black Movement, began as ideologically driven, seeking to address social inequalities. Over time, however, many of these groups deviated from their original goals. As political instability and social unrest increased in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in countries like Nigeria, these groups morphed into violent cult organizations, driven by a desire for power, dominance, and material wealth.

The shift from ideological resistance to criminal behavior can be attributed to the disintegration of political systems, lack of effective law enforcement, and the failure of universities to address student grievances. Cult groups began to thrive on university campuses, using violence and intimidation to recruit and control new members. The 1980s, marked by political instability in many African countries, especially Nigeria, saw the growth of groups like the Black Axe, Eiye, and the Buccaneers (Suleiman, 2020). These cults found fertile ground in the power vacuum created by ineffective governance and law enforcement.

Cult groups differ in terms of their structure, rituals, and aims. Some cults operate under the guise of religious or social clubs, while others are simply power-driven criminal organizations. Common examples include:

Black Axe: One of the most notorious cults in Nigerian universities, this group is known for its violent clashes with rival factions and its extensive involvement in extortion and criminal activities (Ojo & Olatunji, 2021).

Wonder Hands Journal (2026) | Addressing the issue of cultism in higher educational institutions and offering a long-term fix

Eiye: Another powerful group, often associated with political violence, Eiye has gained significant influence on various campuses, enforcing loyalty through violence.

Supreme Vikings: This group is also known for its brutal enforcement tactics and its involvement in campus politics and illegal businesses.

Each group has its own unique set of symbols, rituals, and organizational structure, with a strict hierarchy designed to enforce loyalty and obedience among members. Recruitment into these cults is often based on psychological manipulation, where new members are promised protection and opportunities that they might not otherwise have access to in a university environment (Suleiman, 2021).

Recruitment of Members

The recruitment process used by cult groups is highly manipulative, often preying on vulnerable and isolated students. First-year students or those who feel marginalized or excluded from the social fabric of university life are often targeted. Cult groups promise a sense of belonging, security, and access to influential networks.

The recruitment process involves various psychological tactics, such as peer pressure, threats of violence, and promises of power and social standing. Once a student joins, they may be subjected to rigorous initiation rites, which can range from physical violence to coercion and blackmail. Fear of retaliation and social exclusion often keeps students within the cult, even if they want to leave (Eke, 2022).

Identification of cult members is by distinct symbols and identities. These among others include clothes and accessories as some colors are linked to particular cult groups. They have distinct meeting points and hideouts like restaurants, bars, nightclubs, parks, affiliate homes, and campus halls of residence. Members are often characterized by alienation from their immediate families, scars and body marks, extravagant spendings, frequent change of place of abode, indulgence in the consumption of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs and frequent outings or trips at the expense of their studies. Female members also exhibit some of these traits. (Adigun 2005).

Causes of Cultism in Higher Institutions

A. Socio-Economic Pressures

Economic hardship and social inequalities play a significant role in the rise of cultism. In many developing countries, economic hardships and social inequalities play a significant role in the rise of cultism. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may join cult groups in search of financial benefits, protection, or access to academic and professional opportunities (Alabi & Olayemi, 2020). In environments where the job market is competitive and opportunities are limited, cults provide an alternative pathway to success.

Furthermore, cults often provide social capital to students, allowing them to gain influence on campus, secure leadership positions, or access privileged networks. These factors are particularly

Wonder Hands Journal (2026) | Addressing the issue of cultism in higher educational institutions and offering a long-term fix attractive to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are seeking ways to climb the social ladder.

B. Political Instability

Political instability in many African countries has created an environment where cults can thrive. In nations where law enforcement is weak or corrupt, and where political unrest is widespread, cults often fill the power vacuum. Cult groups are frequently used by political figures or parties as tools for gaining control, manipulating campus elections, or intimidating rival groups (Okeke & Abiola, 2022).

In countries like Nigeria, where cult-related violence often intersects with political struggles, the university becomes a battleground for control over student bodies, which can escalate into full-blown conflict.

C. Institutional Failure

Another key factor contributing to the rise of cultism in universities is the failure of institutions to provide adequate student support. Universities often lack the necessary counseling services, mental health resources, and student welfare programs to address the needs of students. This lack of support creates a gap that cult groups exploit. Without adequate mental health services or avenues for conflict resolution, students are more vulnerable to the pressure of joining cults.

Additionally, universities sometimes fail to take decisive action when cult-related incidents occur, either due to corruption, fear of retribution, or simply a lack of resources. This lack of enforcement creates an environment in which cults can thrive with impunity.

Negative Impact of Cultism in Higher Institutions

A. Disruption of Academic Life

Cultism severely disrupts academic life. Cult-related violence often results in class cancellations, the intimidation of students and faculty, and a general atmosphere of fear on campuses. Students who are not affiliated with cults may be subjected to harassment or threats, leading to academic disengagement. The campus becomes a dangerous environment where intellectual freedom is stifled, and students are more concerned with their safety than their studies (Nwagwu, 2021).

B. Psychological and Emotional Damage

The psychological toll on students who become involved in cultism is significant. Those who are coerced into joining a cult may suffer from anxiety, depression, PTSD, and other mental health issues. The constant threat of violence and retribution creates a state of fear that inhibits personal and academic development (Uduji & Nwachukwu, 2020).

Moreover, the peer pressure and trauma of initiation rites can have long-lasting effects, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation.

C. Criminal Activities and Legal Concerns

Cultism often leads to criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, prostitution, and even murder. These activities tarnish the reputation of universities and expose students and faculty to legal risks. Additionally, cults sometimes take control of campus elections, which can lead to political instability and unrest.

Universities that fail to address cultism adequately face reputational damage, decreased enrollment, loss of funding, and legal liabilities. The role of university administrators in curbing these activities is crucial to maintaining a safe and productive academic environment.

Recommendations for a Permanent Solution to Cultism

Cultism is a complex societal issue, often rooted in socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors. Addressing it requires a holistic approach that combines preventive measures, community engagement, law enforcement, and policy changes.

1. Strengthen Family and Moral Values

Parents should be encouraged to take an active role in monitoring and mentoring their children. Parenting programs should be introduced to educate families on fostering moral and ethical behavior. Schools, religious organizations, and community groups should actively teach the importance of integrity, respect for life, and social harmony.

2. Improve Education System

Introduce courses in moral education, conflict resolution, and leadership skills at all educational levels. Creating and promoting anti-cultism clubs in schools and universities to educate students about the dangers of cultism and provide them with support and guidance.

3. Enhance Economic Opportunities

Providing vocational training and skill acquisition programs for young people to reduce unemployment and idle time, which are major drivers of cultism. Also, by establishing government and private sector programs to empower youths with startup funds and entrepreneurial skills.

4. Strengthen Law Enforcement and Justice Systems

Ensure laws against cultism are strictly enforced, with clear penalties for offenders and promote community policing and intelligence gathering to identify and address cult activities early.

5. Promote Community Engagement

Use community leaders, religious groups, and influencers to lead anti-cultism campaigns and engage the youth. Create programs to rehabilitate former cult members, helping them reintegrate into society as productive citizens.

6. Psychological Support and Counseling

Establish counseling units in schools and communities to address issues of peer pressure, bullying, and low self-esteem, which often drive youth into cultism. Provide psychological support for individuals affected by cult activities.

7. Collaborate with Stakeholders

Government collaboration, NGOs, and private organizations should be put in place to develop and implement anti-cultism strategies. Religious bodies and organizations should equally be active promoting peace and discouraging cult-related practices.

8. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Finally, regular evaluations of anti-cultism initiatives to measure their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement will go a long way in engaging communities to provide feedback on the success of implemented measures.

Governments should collaborate with universities to address cultism, including enacting and enforcing stronger laws. Additionally, community involvement is essential, as parents and local leaders can play a role in shaping students' attitudes and behaviors (Suleiman, 2020; Olayemi & Akinmoladun, 2021).

Universities must foster a culture of inclusion, academic excellence, and non-violence. This can be achieved through leadership programs, student clubs, and fostering a culture of mutual respect (Alabi & Olayemi, 2020; Nwagwu, 2021).

Conclusion

Cultism in higher educational institutions is a pervasive problem that disrupts the academic, social, and psychological well-being of students. To effectively combat cultism, a holistic and long-term approach is needed, focusing on prevention, education, policy reform, and community engagement. By addressing the root causes of cultism and providing students with the support and resources they need, we can create a safer and more conducive environment for learning. Universities, governments, and society at large must come together to tackle this issue and ensure that higher education remains a space for intellectual growth and personal development.

Cultism in higher educational institutions presents a serious threat to the safety, well-being, and academic success of students. While efforts to combat this issue have been made, they have often fallen short of addressing the root causes and providing sustainable solutions. To eliminate cultism in universities, a long-term approach is necessary, which includes strengthening legal frameworks, improving campus security, providing emotional and psychological support to students, and fostering a culture of respect, integrity, and healthy socialization.

Incorporating a combination of strategies such as promoting alternative social platforms, raising awareness, and collaborating with the broader community can significantly reduce the prevalence of cultism. By focusing on prevention, support, and education, universities can create safer environments where students can thrive academically and socially, free from the fear and violence

Wonder Hands Journal (2026) | Addressing the issue of cultism in higher educational institutions and offering a long-term fix associated with cultism. Through these measures, we can look forward to a future where cultism no longer has a place in higher education institutions.

References

- Alabi, A., & Olayemi, O. (2020). Socio-economic factors driving cultism in Nigerian universities. *Journal of Higher Education and Society*, 25(3), 141-154.
- Adigun, E.O. (2005). *The Problem of Cultism in Tertiary Institutions* (pp. 45-55). University Press.
- Eke, O. (2022). The psychological effects of cultism on university students. *African Journal of Psychology*, 14(2), 102-110.
- Nwagwu, L. (2021). Impact of cultism on Nigerian higher education. *Journal of Educational Research*, 39(5), 278-289.
- Okeke, E., & Abiola, F. (2022). Political and social dynamics of cultism in universities. *Journal of Higher Education Politics*, 29(1), 45-60.
- Ojo, M., & Olatunji, K. (2021). The rise of cultism in Nigerian universities Causes and consequences. *Nigerian Journal of Educational Studies*, 12(3), 85-99.
- Okeke, I. (2022). Mental health and cultism on university campuses. *Mental Health and Education Review*, 15(4), 77-89.
- Olayemi, O., & Akinmoladun, I. (2021). Preventing cultism through community engagement: A case study of Nigerian universities. *Community Development Journal*, 31(2), 56-70.
- Suleiman, J. (2020). Cultism and political violence on Nigerian campuses. *African Political Science Review*, 45(2), 103-118.